



Raven of the Inner Palace

WRITTEN BY
Kouko Shirakawa

1
NOVEL





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Seven Seas Entertainment

KOKYU NO KARASU

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The Jade Earring

The Flower Whistle

The Skylark Princess

The Glass Prayer



*The Jade
Earring*

DEEP INSIDE the inner palace lived a woman known as the Raven Consort.

Despite being a consort by title, the Raven Consort was special. She never provided any sort of nighttime entertainment to the emperor, and instead kept a low profile, spending her days inside her jet-black palace and rarely emerging from its doors. Some claimed to have seen her, but their reports were inconsistent—for every person who said she was an old woman, there was someone who said she was a young girl.

In hushed tones, people speculated that maybe she was immortal, or possibly a fearsome ghost. They even said she had mystical magic powers, and rumor had it that she'd take on any task you requested of her. From putting a deadly curse on somebody you hated to summoning the spirits of the dead to finding missing items, she could do it all.

Even though she was a consort who resided in the inner palace, she never received any visits from the emperor...or at least, she wasn't *supposed* to.

One night, however, two shadowy figures made their way toward her palace.

“Ironical that it's called the Yamei Palace, isn't it?”

With hanging lanterns illuminating the walkway he traveled, Ka Koshun gazed at the palace in front of him. The Yamei Palace—meaning “the palace that shone brightly at night”—had jet-black walls that seemed even darker than the darkness that enveloped it. If the moon were out on this night, it would have lit up its blue, lustrous glazed roof tiles, but unfortunately, tonight's moonlight was blocked out by the clouds.

“That's just because the lanterns haven't been lit,” remarked Eisei, who was holding a lamp. He was a eunuch. His voice was high yet clear, and his features were just as beautiful.

Lanterns adorned the front of the Yamei Palace, but none were aflame.

“None from the palace eunuch institute dare get close to the Yamei Palace. They're too scared. I did warn you,” Eisei continued.

“How come?” Koshun’s voice was also quiet as he posed this brief question. He wasn’t making a concerted effort to lower his voice because of his surroundings, though—it was just his usual way. As deep as his tone was, his voice wasn’t cold. Instead, the sound of it brought to mind images of the light seeping through the trees on a winter’s day.

“They say there’s an ominous bird inside, waiting to take flight.”

“What kind of bird?”

“A large, golden one. They say that if you get too close to the palace, it’ll attack you.”

“Oh.” Koshun acknowledged Eisei’s musings, but he didn’t seem very interested. His eyes were fixed on the jet-black palace. There was no light coming from inside the unassuming building, so it looked completely abandoned.

Eisei glanced up at Koshun’s fearless expression from beside him. “Are you really going to visit the Raven Consort, master?”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Koshun replied bluntly.

When a eunuch referred to somebody as such, there was only one person in the land of Sho that they could be talking to—the emperor.

“I don’t see anything wrong with me paying one of my consorts a visit.”

“But the Raven Consort isn’t like your other consorts. If you meet with her, disaster will befall you.”

Koshun let out a deep chuckle. “I never thought *you’d* fall for those rumors, Sei.”

Eisei held his tongue.

“When it comes to the Raven Consort, the rumors vary from plausible theories to complete nonsense, but I know...”

Koshun stopped in his tracks. In front of him stood a cobblestone staircase with large jet-black doors at the top, closed tight to ward off any potential visitors.

“We can worry about the details later. I’ll find out whether the Raven Consort is an immortal or a ghost when I see her with my own eyes.”

He placed his foot onto a cobblestone step. Eisei had taken the lead and pushed against the doors, and they opened slightly without

making a sound. Surprised, he backed away, but at that same moment, something flew out from the shadowy gap between the doors, accompanied by a piercing screech.

Eisei dropped his candlestick, plunging their surroundings into darkness. He could still hear the peculiar cry and the sound of flapping wings, but it was so dark that he couldn't make out what the creature was.

"Stay back, master," Eisei said as distinct, harsh wingbeats and cries echoed through the air.

He soon fell quiet, and the only sound that could be heard was the bird feebly flapping its wings. Once Koshun's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw that Eisei was holding the large bird by the scruff of its neck.

"A...chicken?"

The creature that was writhing in Eisei's grip looked similar to a plump chicken, but its wings glistened faintly in the dark. They looked like they had been drenched in gold dust.

"This bird was a hair's breadth away from harming you, master. Would you like me to wring its neck?" Eisei suggested, prepared to strangle the creature.

"No, wait," Koshun replied in an effort to stop him.

At that moment, however...

"Hey, you lout. Let go of Shinshin," a voice called out.

The doors opened wide, and that calm voice had come from inside. It sounded like the voice of a sweet young girl—as calm as ripples on water—and it lingered pleasantly in the men's ears.

Eisei was so distracted by it that he let the chicken get away. The bird flew back inside. Before them was a spacious room with rows of thin silk curtains draped from the ceiling. At the far end, a white hand peeked out from between a gap in the fabric.

Before those curtains hung lanterns in the shape of lotus flowers. Each one emitted a small amount of light that poured down on the individual who emerged.

For a few moments, Koshun and Eisei were both speechless.

The figure illuminated in the faint light was that of a beautiful

young girl with a pale face and a slight build. She must have been around fifteen or sixteen years old. She wore a traditional hairstyle in which her hair was styled in a bow shape at the back of her head. Her elegant hairdo was adorned with hairpins and intricate golden decorations that were designed to swing as she walked. The two men also noticed peonies embellishing the point where her hair was pinned up, their blossoms as large as the girl's small face. The surprising thing, however, was her clothing—from head to toe, her outfit was as black as coal. Both her robe and the skirt that was worn hiked up over her chest were the same dark color. This outfit, known as a shanqun, was made of black satin with a glossy luster. It was embroidered with delicate floral leaf patterns and featured a gorgeous image of a bird carrying a flower woven into the skirt. The shawl wrapped around her shoulders was made from fine black silk, but the way it glistened as dazzlingly as the evening dew suggested that obsidian may have been woven into its threads.

It was certainly fitting attire for someone called the Raven Consort.

The young girl held the runaway chicken in her arms to stop him from escaping again. Then she looked up at Eisei from under her long eyelashes.

“This is my precious magic bird. If you kill him, there will be no atonement. You should be more careful.”

Koshun noticed that the girl spoke in a very old-fashioned way—and she sounded quite arrogant.

“Are you the Raven Consort, Ryu?”

The young girl then directed her onyx-like eyes toward Koshun. “Why have you come to see me with just your attendant by your side? As I’m sure you know, I don’t engage in any affairs of the night.”

“You were supposed to receive prior notice of my visit.”

“I have received no such thing. Besides, Shinshin would have driven any messenger away.”

The young girl put her golden chicken Shinshin down at her feet. The floor was covered with floral patterned-rugs.

Appalled by the girl's words and attitude, Eisei scowled and was about to give her a piece of his mind, but the emperor held him back.

The two men entered the room and stood in front of a small table with a brocade tablecloth on top of it. The area was filled with the smell of incense wafting from an intricate silver container.

“I have a favor to ask of you, Raven Consort. Hear me out.”

Having announced his intentions, Koshun sat down in a chair. The young girl frowned and made no effort to draw closer. Undeterred, Koshun put his hand in his pocket, took something out, and placed the item on the table.

“I’ve heard that your role is to undertake any task that is asked of you, whether it be placing a deadly curse, benediction, or finding a lost item. Is this correct?”

The girl frowned even more as she glared at the item that Koshun put on the table. It was a jade earring. Instead of being a pair, it was one singular earring with a large, droplet-shaped piece of jade dangling from a gold clasp.

“I won’t undertake *any* task. And all requests come at a price.”

“A price?”

“There’s a saying that goes, ‘If you curse another, dig two graves.’ If you want to place a deadly curse on someone, then another life must be sacrificed to that end. If it’s benediction that you desire, then your material possessions must be offered up. The price of finding lost items is up for negotiation.”

“And if I simply wanted to know who this earring belongs to?” Koshun asked, picking up the jade earring.

The deep green jade, as bright as freshwater, glowed gently in the subtle radiance of the light.

“I decline.”

“How come?”

“You could soon solve that mystery yourself—all you would have to do is ask around. Is that beyond your capabilities for some reason, or do you just have too much time on your hands? Whatever the case, I doubt anything good will come of this. I have no intention of getting embroiled in something so petty.”

She’s smart, thought Koshun about the young woman in front of him.

“People say you are either immortal or a ghost...” Koshun placed the earring down again and stood up. He drew closer to the girl. “But you’re a normal girl, aren’t you?” he said quietly, taking hold of her hand.

It was a warm, humanlike hand. The girl tensed up.

“I heard that you were found and brought here at a very young age. Now that I think about it, I still haven’t asked for your name. What is it?”

The girl darted her eyes about. Her voice was nothing more than a quiet whisper. “...Jusetsu.”

“Ryu Jusetsu... That’s a nice name,” Koshun replied nonchalantly.

Jusetsu glared up the emperor with a hint of redness in her cheeks. Koshun found himself thinking that she resembled a cat whose fur was standing on end. He looked down at the girl’s hand in his. Her arms were pale and slender, but he could see small marks on her skin. They were reddish-brown and shaped like flowers—but they almost resembled burn scars.

Jusetsu shook herself free from Koshun’s grip.

“Your request doesn’t interest me. Now leave.”

That was a bit harsh, thought the emperor—but at that same moment, Jusetsu took a peony out of her hair. As soon as she placed it in her palm, it dissipated in a wisp of smoke and transformed into a pale red flame.

Koshun wasn’t the type to be fazed by much, but this understandably surprised him and caused him to take a step back.

When Jusetsu blew air into the flame, a powerful gust hit Koshun and he was overcome by a peculiar sense of vertigo. He closed his eyes tight and turned his face away from the wind. Once the emperor steadied his wobbly legs and looked up, he found himself outside with that jet-black doorway standing in front of him.

Nobody said a word. Koshun simply stared at the doors, dumbfounded. What was going on?

“You’ve forgotten something,” Jusetsu called out.

The doors opened slightly, and the earring came flying out of the gap between them. Koshun quickly reached out and grabbed it, and the

doors slammed shut again with a loud thud.

“Looks like we’ve been locked out...”

Eisei stood by the emperor’s side, looking confused. “Was that an example of the Raven Consort’s mystical abilities?”

“It looks that way. I suppose I upset her though, haven’t I?”

Koshun put the earring in his breast pocket and took a moment to catch his breath.

She may have been called Juseitsu—a name written using the characters for “longevity” and “snow”—but her temperament was more reminiscent of fiery summer heat.

Koshun descended the stairs outside the palace and began to go back the way he came. Eisei picked up the lamp he dropped from its place on the ground and followed suit.

“Who is the Raven Consort?”

“She’s...some sort of shrine maiden, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?”

“She may be descended from the shrine maiden who served the goddess Uren Niangniang. There used to be a shrine here, long ago. After that, the previous dynasty built the imperial estate here.” Koshun sounded as if he were reading straight out of the *Duo Encyclopedia of History*.

“The emperors held the mystical abilities that the shrine maiden possessed in such high esteem that they wanted to keep them all to themselves. As such, they decided to keep her in the inner palace and bestow her with a special title—the Raven Consort. Or, at least, that’s what it says in the book.”

Koshun’s grandfather inherited the throne from an emperor from the previous dynasty—thus establishing the current one—and kept the capital and the imperial estate the way they were. The Raven Consort’s presence was just another part of that.

“The Raven Consort doesn’t get replaced when a new emperor comes to power. The previous Raven Consort had been there since the previous dynasty, and the current Ryu Raven Consort took on the role two years ago.”

Which was before Koshun ascended to the throne.

“They say it’s that golden chicken that finds the Raven Consort’s successor. I’m relieved you didn’t strangle it, Sei. Your hasty impulses could have got us in a lot of trouble.”

Eisei looked embarrassed. “Even so, do you really need to ask a favor from a little girl like that, master?” It seemed like Eisei couldn’t bear the way Jusetsu spoke to the emperor as if he were an equal—no, as if she were his superior.

“No one can order the Raven Consort to do anything. That’s what makes her special. Who am I to break a rule that has been in effect for generations?” Koshun hated breaking the rules. He believed that reason was to be respected, and both benevolence and righteousness were to be observed.

“You take these things far too seriously, master,” Eisei grumbled.

The corners of Koshun’s mouth turned up slightly. “Word has it that the walls of the Yamei Palace are painted black because they’ve been soiled with the blood of those who tried to harm the Raven Consort. Did you know that, Sei?”

Eisei scowled, almost as if he could smell the blood himself.

Koshun patted his chest. The jade earring was inside his breast pocket.

“Well, what do we do now?”

Koshun had to get Jusetsu to accept his request, even if it meant appeasing her.

After all, it was likely something that only she could help him with.

The young woman placed a piece of fragrant wood on top of the ashes in the furnace and, after a short wait, a thin wisp of smoke slowly trailed from the incense burner. A strong aroma filled the air.

Jusetsu moved away from the incense burner and sat down in her chair. As pleasant as the scent was, it didn’t help her melancholic mood.

It was because of the young emperor, who had visited her the previous night. And she knew he’d probably come again.

What a nuisance, she thought to herself. The modest requests she received from the women of the inner palace didn't bother her, but the emperor's request was extremely troublesome.

Jusetsu rubbed her arm over her robe—the same arm that Koshun grabbed the previous night. From close up, the emperor looked younger than she imagined, but he still appeared mature for his age. His gaze was as gentle as the winter sun, but she expected him to be more intimidating.

The emperor had ascended the throne just one year after Jusetsu took over from the previous Raven Consort. There was apparently some sort of trouble when it came to deciding the previous emperor's successor, but Jusetsu was a shut-in who devoted herself to discipline. She didn't know the details, and they didn't interest her either.

Shinshin was stretched out on the mat, but suddenly looked up with a start. It immediately flapped its wings and began to thrash about. The bird then raced around the room, crying out as it did so.

“Stop it, Shinshin.”

Jusetsu tried to quell the bird's outburst, but Shinshin didn't seem to be listening at all. Instead, it scattered its feathers about as it wailed. The golden chicken was an obedient bird when the previous Raven Consort was still around—but now that Jusetsu was in charge, it completely ignored everything she said.

Legend had it that the golden bird could sense if there was gold in the vicinity and could also locate dead bodies. It was a mystical bird with golden feathers—a rare creature indeed. Originally, Shinshin had a slim build, but perhaps due to the lavish offerings that were provided for it in the inner palace, it had now become quite plump. When Jusetsu first laid eyes on the bird, it occurred to her that it would taste wonderful roasted. However, Shinshin may have sensed this, as it still kept her at arms' length.

Jusetsu sighed and raised her hand toward the doors. She made a gesture that looked as if she was pulling at a piece of string, and they silently opened.

At the entrance stood Koshun and his attendant, the eunuch, just as they had the night before.

Koshun was once again wearing a composed expression that made it impossible to read his emotions. *He's as imperturbable as a mountain in*

the winter, Jusetsu thought to herself. *Quiet and unmoving, silently waiting for the spring to arrive.*

“Visit me as many times as you like, but your request will still fall on deaf ears,” Jusetsu asserted coldly.

Koshun, seemingly unperturbed by this abrasive greeting, stepped inside the room.

“Are you listening?”

Koshun exchanged glances with the eunuch behind him as Jusetsu watched on with a frown. Seeming to recognize what he was supposed to do, Eisei moved forward. He was holding a tray in his hand, on top of which sat a steaming basket.

“...What have you got there?” Jusetsu asked.

The eunuch silently placed the steaming basket on the table and lifted the lid. At that very moment, steam rose from the food inside.

Jusetsu was visibly surprised.

The steaming basket contained a number of baozi; plump white filled buns.

“I had the confectioners make them just now. They’re fresh and have lotus seed bean paste on the inside. I heard these were your favorite.”

That was correct. Jusetsu could not take her eyes off them. Koshun sat down opposite her, put the lid back on the basket, and pulled the tasty treats toward him.

“Will you hear me out?”

Jusetsu looked at Koshun and the steaming basket in turn, then contemplated her options for a short while. She expected them to bring some bait to entice her, but she naively assumed that it would be money or a hair ornament. Things like that didn’t interest Jusetsu, but she was *obsessed* with food. Until coming here at the age of six, food was hard to come by.

Jusetsu swallowed hard, then glared at Koshun. “If you just want me to listen, then I accept...but nothing more.”

Koshun gave a slight smile. This was the first time Jusetsu saw something akin to a genuine facial expression come across his face.

“I found this in the inner palace a few days ago,” Koshun began,

taking out the jade earring from the day before. “Do you know who may have dropped it?”

“No,” Jusetsu replied curtly as she bit into a filled bun. The dough was soft and moist, and the lotus seed bean paste was slightly sweet.

“Are you sure? I thought you were supposed to know everything.”

“Don’t be so stupid. I’m no god. If it were the other way round, it’d be different. I can find an item that someone has dropped just by following their qi—or their energy, if you will—but it doesn’t work in reverse. Possessions don’t emit enough qi to direct me to their owner, and there are too many people here for me to track anyone down in that scenario.”

“I understand...” It seemed unlikely that Koshun really *did* understand, but he gave a slow nod anyway.

“In that case, see yourself out.” As she stuffed filled buns into her mouth, Jusetsu waved her hand at the emperor, as if to shoo away a dog.

Koshun, however, didn’t get up, and crossed his arms thoughtfully. “...Then let me change my request. I’m actually in a bit of a quandary over this.”

“A quandary?”

This revelation wouldn’t pique Jusetsu’s interest—or at least, the emperor didn’t expect it to.

“You see, this earring seems to be haunted by a ghost.”

Jusetsu, who was enjoying her filled buns, looked up.

“What do you mean, it *seems* to be? Did you see one?”

“Just the once. And only vaguely.” Koshun looked at the earring. “It was the ghost of a woman dressed in a ruqun, a short jacket and skirt. She was wearing one of these earrings, but only on her left ear. Do you know who that was?”

Jusetsu frowned as she cast a glance at the earring. “I may have some knowledge pertaining to this situation, but it’s not comprehensive. Still, even if I *did* know who she was, what would it mean to you? Is finding out the owner of the earring or the true identity of the ghost really so important that you had to come all the way out here to ask me about it?”

"I'm just curious. Once something has got my attention, I just can't get it out of my head—that's the kind of person I am."

What a liar, Jusetsu thought as she stared at Koshun's face. He didn't look like the sort of young man who was brimming with curiosity. In fact, he seemed like nothing would interest him. To Jusetsu, he appeared self-composed, to put it nicely—or, if she was feeling less charitable, he looked as emotionally stunted as a wooden puppet.

"If you don't know who the owner is, then identifying that ghost for me would suffice. Asking unnecessary questions is only going to make this more troublesome for you. You hate dealing with nuisances, don't you?"

He was certainly right about that, but having it pointed out to her got on Jusetsu's nerves. She stayed silent, and Koshun pointed at the steaming basket. It was already empty.

"Do however much work it takes to repay us for the filled buns. How does that sound? You wouldn't want to be greedy, would you?"

Being described as such left Jusetsu displeased. "You're more unpleasant than I expected you to be."

"Are you saying I looked like I'd be nice? That's a first for me," Koshun replied indifferently.

Jusetsu furrowed her brow silently.

"You're cuter than I expected you to be," the emperor added.

The girl's face immediately turned vermillion. She leaped to her feet, which made her chair fall over. Shinshin, who'd been lying by her side, jumped back in a panic.

"Sei, pick that chair back up," Koshun ordered quietly.

The eunuch put the collapsed chair back in place. With her face still flushed red, Jusetsu gave Koshun a furious scowl and sat back down.

Koshun held out the jade earring to Jusetsu. She continued to glare at him, but she reached out her hand and took it from him.

The jade was cool, but she could sense a strange warmth in the deep, green color that seemed as if it would suck her in. It gave off the same air as the murmuring of a flowing river, or perhaps being

surrounded by the tranquility of a forest.

Jusetsu placed the earring in one of her hands and used the other one to take a peony out of her hair. It was no normal flower; it was the physical embodiment of Jusetsu's gifts.

When she placed the peony into her palm, it instantly transformed into a pale red flame. Jusetsu blew on it, causing the flame to flicker. It then turned to smoke and encircled the jade earring.

The pale red smoke gradually faded and was replaced by the appearance of a figure in front of the flame. At first, it was hard to see, but it soon became clearer. It was the figure of a woman wearing a red ruqun, the same traditional outfit that the emperor previously described. Her hair was tied up in a high knot, but it was disheveled. Next to her down-turned face dangled a singular jade earring. One of her sleeves had been torn from her jacket, exposing her pale arm. Jusetsu also spotted some golden marks on the inside of her wrist—three round spots, much like Orion's belt.

The woman, who'd been looking down at the ground, slowly lifted her head.

"Augh!" The eunuch covered his mouth.

The woman's face was purple and swollen, and her eyes looked like they were about to pop out at any moment. She had a silk shawl tied tightly around her thin neck. Her tongue hung loosely out of her gaping mouth, and she clawed at her neck with her fingers.

"This is no good. She won't be able to speak if she's like this."

Jusetsu stood up and breathed on the woman. She let the smoke disperse, and with that, the figure vanished.

The eunuch let out a sigh of palpable relief and wiped the sweat from his pale forehead.

Jusetsu sat down and gave the earring back to Koshun. "If she can't speak to us, I won't be able to find out her name. I advise you to give up."

Koshun, whose face hadn't turned the slightest bit pale at the sight of the ghost, crossed his arms and mulled things over. "...Was that ghost strangled to death?"

"Either that or suicide. I wouldn't know."

“She was a concubine, wasn’t she?”

“...It would seem that way.”

The ghost had golden marks on her wrist. A constellation of three stars, just like Orion’s belt in the sky. That symbol was proof that she was an inner palace concubine. She appeared to have been from the current dynasty as well, as those three stars were the emblem of the Ka lineage, the reigning imperial family.

“That means that ghost would have been a concubine in the inner palace during my grandfather’s reign.”

“Or yours, perhaps.”

“A concubine is yet to pass away in my time as emperor.”

The word *yet* made Jusetsu feel slightly glum. It wasn’t unusual for a concubine or court lady to die in the inner palace as they vied for the emperor’s affections.

Poisonings, women drowning themselves, executions... Some concubines even came to the Raven Consort asking for curses to be placed on their rivals. Once they found that such a service would cost them their own lives, however, they all went away.

Koshun picked up the earring. “We might not know whether she was strangled or killed herself, but is she haunting this earring because she died in such a miserable way?”

“She must be.” That was generally why spirits stayed around.

“Can’t we do something about it?”

“Huh?” Jusetsu blinked in response to this question. “What do you mean?”

“They say that people go to a paradise beyond the sea when they die—but if you’re a ghost, that’s out of the question, and you must suffer for all eternity. Isn’t there any way we can save that woman?”

Jusetsu examined the look on the emperor’s face but was unable to discern any emotion from it. He was impossible to read.

“Well, it is possible, but...” There were several ways to send a ghost to paradise. Things like consoling them with a repose of the soul ritual or eliminating any lingering regrets they may have usually did the trick.

Once Jusetsu explained this to Koshun, he spent another few

moments thinking to himself. “If she was killed in the inner palace—or if she was driven to kill herself—I’m sure she has plenty of unfinished business here,” he said.

His tone of voice was casual, but there was a strange softness to it too. His voice lacked the coldness that you’d expect from someone who never showed his emotions.

Koshun’s words stirred Jusetu’s emotions. Just moments ago, she had witnessed that tragic ghost with her own eyes. Being a concubine, that woman would have been bafflingly beautiful while she was still alive, but the anguish and fear she had experienced was clear to see on her face. How much pain had that woman suffered?

“Won’t you save her for me?” Koshun pleaded.

Jusetu wasn’t sure how to respond. She wanted to avoid trouble and would have preferred not to get too involved with the emperor. And yet...

The jade part of the earring glimmered faintly in Koshun’s hand.

“...You have marks on your arm too, don’t you?” Koshun said to Jusetu, who was deliberating what to do. Jusetu covered her arm reflexively.

“These aren’t the symbol of the inner palace. They’re just birthmarks.”

“I know. They’re in a different place, and they’re a different shape.”

Why are you bringing it up, then? Jusetu wondered as she tried to read his face. As she expected, though, she couldn’t work out what he was thinking.

“They’re shaped like flowers, from what I remember. They almost looked like burn scars...”

Jusetu stood up.

“That’s enough unnecessary chatter for one day. Fine—I’ll take on your request about the ghost with the earring,” she said, before leaning forward and snatching the earring out of Koshun’s hand. “But I can’t promise you I’ll be able to save her, all right?”

“Yes, that’s fine. Thank you for your help.”

“But why *are* you going to such lengths for that ghost? Is this

really because of an earring you just found on the ground?”

Koshun replied to Jusetsu’s query with just one line. “I suppose I feel sorry for her.”

Jusetsu frowned. She was far from convinced that was the only reason.

“Well, never mind. Now, you should provide me with a list of all the concubines under the previous emperor, as well as the emperor before that. We must start by identifying who that ghost really is.”

They would need detailed information, including her name and place of origin, to perform a repose of the soul ritual. That could help determine why she had lingering regrets as well.

“A list? That’s impossible,” Koshun retorted dismissively.

“Why? All you have to do is demand one, and it’ll be prepared for you.”

Jusetsu heard from the previous Raven Consort that lists of concubines, eunuchs, and death records were stored in the inner palace registry. The only information that *wasn’t* recorded there was the names of the Raven Consorts. If any concubine died an unnatural death, it would be easy to tell from those records—that was, if it was properly documented.

“If I make that demand, people will find out that I’m up to something.”

“What?”

“That would be a problem for me. There are some who get abnormally suspicious over every little move I make.”

Jusetsu didn’t say a thing.

“Sei,” Koshun called out to the eunuch behind him.

The eunuch bowed, seemingly having understood what the emperor was asking of him.

“Let’s see if we can pull some strings. It might take a bit of time, but...”

Then Koshun looked back at Jusetsu and made her a vague promise. “If I manage to get those records, I’ll bring them to you.”

The fact that the emperor’s demands could be fulfilled as soon as

you issued an order seemed to be more of a hassle than it was worth. After a few moments of contemplation, Jusetu grinned at her visitors.

“In that case, I’d like you to bring me something else.”

“What is it?”

Koshun seemed slightly taken aback by Jusetu’s request.

The next day, Jusetu slipped out of the Yamei Palace’s doors. The drum had only just sounded to announce the hour of the dragon, so it must have been about eight in the morning. It wasn’t often that Jusetu left her palace this early in the day—well, she rarely left it at all, for that matter. But as early as it was, the palace officials would have already been at work.

The clothing that Jusetu wore as she walked down the passageway was very different from her usual garb. She was dressed in a plain, light coral ruqun with no embroidery or printing, and her hair was tied up in a high knot without a single hairpin to adorn it. This was how the female palace cleaners dressed. This was what Jusetu had asked Koshun to fetch for her the previous evening.

She figured it would be quicker for her to procure the list of names herself, rather than wait however long it would take for Koshun to find them. Jusetu wasn’t a very patient person.

She’d changed clothes entirely by herself. There was only one elderly maid who worked in the Yamei Palace, and Jusetu had no lady-in-waiting. She’d refused one, insisting that she had no need for such help. After all, Jusetu was raised as a commoner, and she was more than capable of taking care of her personal affairs herself. Plus, there were some things that she didn’t want others to see.

As Jusetu turned down the hallway, the blue, glazed roof tiles of a palace came into view. For a few moments, she wasn’t sure what she was looking at, but once she spotted the decorative swallow tiles on the roof, she recognized it. It was the Hien Palace, also known as the palace of the flying swallows. The imperial concubines, those who ranked just below the empress and the emperor’s other consorts, lived there.

As she got closer, Jusetu noticed a wave of yellow surrounding the palace. It was a number of Lady Banks’ roses. They’d constructed trellises outside, and the flowering plants trailed beautifully over it.

So, it's that season already, thought Jusetu as she spent a few moments entranced by the yellow flowers.

She then noticed that she could hear voices chattering nearby. She was at the back of the Hien Palace, where the rear entrance—used by the assistant court ladies and maid servants—to one of the older buildings was located. This building was one of many.

“*Please* do this for me! I need it by tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?! That’s impossible.”

“It’s only a small sewing job. It will only take a minute, won’t it?”

“Altering a dress is *not* an easy task. I have my own work to do too, you know.”

Jusetu snuck a peek through the roses, hiding in a spot where the women wouldn’t be able to see her. In the shadow of a poorly drained and damp building, two court ladies stood opposite one another. One of them was petite and dressed in a light yellow ruqun, while the other wore a blue one. Light yellow ruqun were worn by the palace kitchen staff, whereas the palace catalogers uniformly wore blue. The court lady in blue was trying to thrust a robe at the other woman, who was trying to refuse it. It seemed as if the woman in blue was asking her to fix the robe.

“You can just do it when you’re finished with work, can’t you?”

“Don’t be so preposterous...”

The girl in the light yellow looked helpless, her face contorted as if she were about to cry.

Why doesn't she just shove her off and walk away if it's that much bother? Jusetu thought to herself as she watched the drama unfold.

“This isn’t like my usual requests! Stop being so stubborn. If you say no, I’m going to tell your father and destroy your family’s store!”

“You wouldn’t dare...!”

Letting out a grumble, Jusetu crouched down at the roots of the flowers. It’d be a nuisance to get involved, so she decided to pretend not to see them and pass by.

Jusetu then stood up, came out of the shade of the trees, and spoke. “You’re not a *baby*. I’m sure you can manage a bit of sewing by yourself.”

The two court ladies turned around, surprised.

“Who on earth are you?” the girl in the blue ruqun asked in a tizzy.

“I’m a simple court lady, as you can see by my dress,” Jusetu replied, puffing her chest out with pride. “That girl does not want to help you. Are you incapable of doing your own chores?”

The girl in blue looked Jusetu up and down suspiciously.

“Why would I do something that I could get someone else to do for me? I don’t need you to order me around,” said the girl, before unexpectedly backing down with the curt comment, “Never mind. I’ll let this one go.”

Jusetu was disappointed with how the conflict fizzled out, but the girl in blue simply ignored the girl in light yellow and walked away, seeming to have already lost interest.

The girl in light yellow let out a sigh of relief.

“Umm... Thank you,” she said to Jusetu. Her voice was as quiet as a little bird.

She had quite a pretty face. Daughters of high-ranking officials and girls from respected families were often selected to become concubines and court ladies, but others were chosen for their appearance. This girl likely fell into the latter category.

“She’s always giving me unreasonable requests like that, so I was in quite a pickle... But my family runs a rice cake shop and her father is an assistant in the trade committee, so I couldn’t afford to refuse.”

The trade committee was the authority in charge of the market, but it seemed wholly unlikely that one of their *assistants* would be able to destroy a rice cake shop just by picking faults with it.

“She was one of the palace catalogers, was she not? Does she normally come all this way to request these unceremonious tasks of you?”

Court ladies that worked as kitchen staff and cleaners worked everywhere, with a number of them assigned to each palace. However, the palace catalogers worked at the archives in the inner palace, which was some distance from the Hien Palace.

“It’s not *me* she comes here for. I think there’s a eunuch here that

she exchanges letters with.”

“Oh...”

It wasn't unheard of for court ladies to be on intimate terms with eunuchs, but Jusetsu couldn't understand why she couldn't have stuck to giving him the letter and left the poor girl alone. Perhaps she just couldn't resist bullying her while she was in the vicinity.

The girl in the light yellow ruqun took another close look at Jusetsu's face.

“So, which palace do you work for? We haven't met, have we? You look like you work in the kitchens, but I don't think I recognize you.”

There was an enormous number of court ladies around, so it wasn't unusual to come across an unfamiliar face. Jusetsu thought about giving the name of a random palace, but if the girl had friends there, she'd be in trouble. With this being the case, she simply replied, “The Yamei Palace.”

“What? Are you the Raven Consort?! I've heard that there aren't any court ladies there.”

“Why wouldn't there be?” said Jusetsu.

The girl was right—there weren't—but a palace without any was almost unheard of, so she took Jusetsu's word for it.

“What's the Raven Consort like, though? Is it true that she's just a young girl?”

“She is sixteen years of age.”

“Really? That's so young!” commented the girl, seeming surprised. “Is it true that she has mystical powers? Can she predict the weather? And can she *really* predict who's going to die?”

Jusetsu expected her to be a quiet girl, but she was surprisingly talkative. She reminded her of a skylark, chirping at the top of its lungs. Jusetsu kept quiet, and before long, the girl suddenly clasped her hands against her mouth.

“Don't tell me...that you're not allowed to talk about her?” she asked nervously.

It'd be a nuisance to explain otherwise, so Jusetsu simply nodded.

The girl nodded back at her repeatedly, then changed the subject.

“Still, you’re too pretty to be a court lady. You’re beautiful! What’s your name? I’m Jiujiu.” That was a common name out in the city.

“I am known by the name Jusetu,” the Raven Consort said.

“You have a funny way of talking, Jusetu. Not even the *concubines* talk in that stuffy, old-fashioned way these days.”

“...Don’t they?”

All this time, Jusetu had been convinced that all upper-class people spoke like that. Having had a rough city upbringing, the previous Raven Consort had been the one to teach her this way of speaking. Her mentor had come from a distinguished family, but Jusetu didn’t realize that her speech would be so old-fashioned due to her advanced age.

Then, perhaps out of concern for Jusetu—who was looking shocked—Jiujiu hastily cleared things up.

“But I think it suits you! Yeah. I mean, you’ve got that ethereal beauty thing going on. And you must have had a good upbringing, right?”

Jusetu silently shook her head.

“Really? Well, you must have been chosen for your looks, then. I’m sure you’re the prettiest of all the court ladies. It’s a real waste,” said Jiujiu. “There are even some *concubines* who’ve never been called on, so there’s no way a court lady could become a royal mistress.”

Jiujiu let out a resigned laugh. Now that she’d come to the imperial estate, she would have to stay here for the rest of her life. Things might have been okay if she had the emperor’s favor, but that was just a pipe dream for a court lady.

“I wouldn’t want the emperor to summon me, anyway.”

Jusetu frowned as she remembered his sly, emotionless expression. Jiujiu blinked at her in surprise.

“You’re an unusual one, Jusetu,” she replied, but the moment she finished speaking, a voice came from the back entrance to the palace.

“Jiujiu! Are you there? What are you slacking off for?”

“Coming!” Jiujiu responded, flustered. She then turned to Jusetu and added, “See you later, then. And thanks for earlier.”

However, when Jiujiu set off toward the door, Jusetu started following behind her.

“Huh? What’s up?” Jiujiu asked.

“I am going to help you with your work.”

“What? Don’t you have your own jobs to do?”

“I’m unoccupied for the moment,” Jusetu said.

Jusetu hadn’t made this suggestion out of kindness, though—she just thought she might be able to gather some information while she was helping out.

Jiujiu seemed skeptical, but she brushed it off by reminding herself that the Yamei Palace was no ordinary palace.

They stepped inside the spacious kitchen. Several large stoves were positioned along the wall. A number of servant girls were in front of them, lighting them up. Lucky charms dedicated to the god of ovens were stuck to the wall behind the stoves alongside hanging scrolls featuring couplets designed to ward off bad luck. The same was true for the Yamei Palace, but the customs in the concubines’ kitchen didn’t seem much different from those in the city.

Large jars stood lined up in a row along the opposite wall. At the long desk in the center, the kitchen ladies were mashing sesame seeds with wooden pestles and sifting the loose seed dust with a colander.

“Has breakfast not been served yet?” Jusetu asked.

“Of course it has. We’re preparing dinner,” Jiujiu replied.

This came as a surprise to Jusetu. *This early in the morning?* she thought. That would have been unthinkable in the Yamei Palace, where it was just Jusetu and her maidservant.

“Hey, you can’t go bringing a court lady from another palace here!”

As critical as the other court ladies were, Jiujiu stuck up for herself. “But she’s my friend. And she wanted to help us.” She took Jusetu by the hand and led her into the corner to a rice mortar containing some roots that had been tossed inside.

“Why don’t you do some hulling for us?” Jiujiu suggested, passing Jusetu the pestle.

“How do you do that?”

“You soak them in water once they’ve been ground up, let them dry, and then turn them into grains. Bracken grains.”

I see, Jusetsu thought to herself as she began striking at the bracken roots. There was another mortar beside her, so Jiujiu went over to it and began moving her pestle in the same way. The satisfying sound of their pestles crashing against the hard surfaces echoed monotonously around the room.

“Did you come to the palace after the current emperor came to power?” Jusetsu asked.

“Yeah. I’ve been here for a year.”

“In that case, I doubt you know anything about the previous emperor and the one before that, do you?”

“I haven’t had any direct experience with them, but I’ve heard plenty of stories from court ladies who’ve been here for years. They’re all about the previous emperor, though—anything beyond that is ancient history.”

Jusetsu almost stopped moving the pestle, disrupting the sound it was making. “What do you mean by plenty of stories?”

“Well, this is the inner palace we’re talking about, so as you’d expect, things happen. Stuff was particularly crazy when the previous emperor was around—with the empress and everything...” Jiujiu took a quick look around, then lowered her voice.

“The empress?”

“The current empress dowager. She’s in confinement now.”

“Confinement?!”

“Shh!” hushed Jiujiu, chiding Jusetsu for speaking so loudly. “We’ll get punished if we talk about it in the open. Don’t you know what happened to her, Jusetsu? The empress dowager.”

“I don’t,” Jusetsu replied, but she could tell by Jiujiu’s face that she didn’t believe her.

“But you must have heard that the current emperor once had his position as heir taken away from him, right?”

Jusetsu shook her head, and Jiujiu’s eyes grew even wider. Her expression reminded Jusetsu of the skylark that would perch on the window grate back at her palace. This girl really *did* resemble a bird.

“Our emperor has had a really hard time of things. This is just a rumor, but they say the empress dowager murdered the emperor’s real mother. That’s why the emperor lost his position as heir, even though he was a crown prince.”

Apparently, Koshun had been forced into a corner of the inner court, almost as if he were imprisoned himself.

“But the emperor didn’t give up—he gathered his strength and roused himself to action. He got the northern imperial defense army on his side since it’s their job to protect the emperor and his family, and they defeated the officials and eunuchs who had been pandering to the empress dowager...”

Jiujiu told the story as if she saw it unfold with her own eyes. According to Jiujiu, this was the talk of the town. Jusetsu had no idea. She had heard that there was some dispute over who would be the emperor’s successor, but nothing past that. The previous Raven Consort never went into any more detail about it either.

“The emperor’s real mother was called Sha, and she was a really beautiful woman. I hear that the emperor inherited her good genes, but I wouldn’t know—I’ve never seen him with my own eyes.”

Jiujiu blushed as her imagination went wild. Jusetsu wanted to tell her what an insipid young man the emperor was, but she held her tongue.

“She lived in the Hakkaku Palace. Being the fourth consort, she ranked pretty low among her peers, you see.”

There were differences in rank even among the emperor’s consorts. The Hakkaku Palace wasn’t a particularly big one either. The consort who was assigned to that palace was known as the Crane Consort—taken from the palace’s name as it was written using the character for “crane”—but she was also only the fourth most important consort overall. She may have been the crown prince’s biological mother, but her rank meant she was either low in status or lacked backing from anyone important.

“You said many things happened in the inner palace during the previous emperor’s reign. What did you mean by that?” Jusetsu asked, going back to the topic at hand.

“So like, you know, the empress dowager murdered his birth mother, made the consort who was carrying the emperor’s child have a

miscarriage, cut off the tongues of the court ladies she didn't like, and so on and so forth... One consort got executed for having an illicit affair, another was poisoned by a fellow consort... The consort who administered the poison ended up hanging herself, and..."

"Wait," ordered Jusetsu, interrupting Jiujiu's flow.

Jiujiu gave her a blank look. "What is it?"

"Did you say there was a consort who hung herself?"

"That's what I heard. She was found hanging from a beam in her room with a silk shawl around her neck..." Jiujiu's cute face scrunched up as she said that.

"What was her name? That consort. What was she called?"

"Huh? Hmm... I don't remember."

"Would the court lady who told you that story know?"

"Yeah, I guess so... Hey, wait!"

Jusetsu cast away her pestle, grabbed Jiujiu by the hand, and headed toward the door.

"Take me to her."

"But what about work?!" Jiujiu protested.

"That can wait."

Jusetsu bolted out of the kitchen with Jiujiu in tow, who followed in apparent resignation. Apparently, that court lady was one of the palace textile dyers, so she'd probably be in the washing area. Jusetsu just needed Jiujiu to take her there.

They went around to the back of the building where the court ladies lived and reached an area where a variety of fabrics were hanging up to dry. They could also see some court ladies standing next to a well, washing textiles in washbowls.

Jiujiu called out to one of them. "Gugu!"

That was a respectful way of addressing an older court lady. A woman in her forties turned around. Her wrinkles stood out on her sunburned skin, but she still had a beautiful face. It was no wonder that she'd been chosen as a court lady.

"Did you need something?"

"This girl wants to ask you something—about the consort who

hung herself.”

The woman gave Jiujiu a skeptical look. “Now? I don’t mind, but I *am* busy, so you’ll have to lend me a hand while we talk.”

She instructed Jusetsu to wash the wet clothes, and the Raven Consort followed along obediently. The older woman got Jiujiu embroiled in helping out too.

“What’s your name? Jusetsu? Hmm. Well, I’m Ashu,” she explained as she carried on with her duties, “All the new court ladies want to hear about things like this. They just can’t get enough of my spooky stories or juicy romantic gossip.”

She had looked unfriendly—or even a little angry—but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“After all, there’s not much else in the way of entertainment around here. Anyway, that woman who died by hanging was named Han. She was one of the warbler ladies. I’ve forgotten what her position was now, though.”

The warbler ladies were lower-ranking concubines, referred to with “Ojo” as their title. How many of them could there be?

“Han Ojo was a slightly fragile-looking beauty. She wasn’t the type that stood out. She used to live in the third consort’s palace.”

Only the highest-ranking concubines were given their own palaces. Lower-ranking ones just had a room in one of the palace buildings. The third consort was gifted the Jakuso Palace and was bestowed with the title of Magpie Consort. This appellation too included the same character for magpie that was present in the palace’s name. The title of empress, incidentally, was the highest rank of them all.

“I wonder what that consort’s name was... The Magpie Consort was young and beautiful, and to top it off, she was the daughter of the emperor’s chief vassal. Being so young, she was ignorant of how the world worked. People said that made her a very arrogant and impudent girl. However, one day, she was given some poisoned broth and passed away. She was pregnant at the time, so the palace investigators did some serious research into what went on. As it turned out, Han, the warbler lady, had some wolf’s bane in her bedroom cupboard.”

Wolf’s bane was a poisonous plant that contained a deadly poison

in its roots.

“The day they found it, Han Ojo hung herself. She was found in her room, dangling from a beam by her own silk shawl.”

Then Ashu lowered her voice.

“Not long after, rumors started circulating that she’d come back as a ghost. You could apparently hear her weeping as she walked, trailing her skirt behind her with her long hair down.”

Jiujiu let out a fearful squeal. “Not this again, Gugu! You’re just trying to scare her now. Plus, I bet you made that last bit up.”

“You’d be surprised, Jiujiu. Some of us have seen her with our own eyes!”

“That warbler lady, Han... Did she wear earrings?” Jusetsu interrupted.

“Earrings?”

“Jade earrings, specifically.”

Ashu tilted her head to one side. “I don’t know about that. I only saw her once or twice myself. I never spoke to her directly.”

“...Should you really be making up rumors about someone you’ve never even spoken to, just for the fun of it?”

“Excuse me?”

I suppose death is just another form of entertainment in the inner palace, Jusetsu thought, shaking her head. “Never mind. What happened to Han’s lady-in-waiting? How about her maid? Are they still in the inner palace?”

Ashu seemed a little taken aback by Jusetsu’s barrage of questions but responded anyway. “Probably...but I have no idea where they work. This is a huge place, you know.”

Jusetsu felt disheartened. She was certain that Han’s lady-in-waiting or her maid would know whether she wore jade earrings, but for now, she had no conclusive evidence that the ghost was really Han Ojo.

“Do you know if there has been anyone else who hung themselves or was strangled to death?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but I have a feeling that there was. You

know the emperor's biological mother, Consort Sha, was poisoned as well, don't you? There was a consort who was beheaded in prison too. Poisoning is the most common, though. There are food testers, but things still slip through the cracks."

Jusetsu thought to herself for a moment. "...Did Han *really* poison the Magpie Consort? She might have had a poison plant in her cupboard, but what if somebody else had put it there?"

Ashu grimaced. "That's a fair point. Anything is possible in a place like this. It's questionable whether the consort who drowned herself actually jumped into the pond by her own accord, and who knows whether that other one was *really* having an affair? If they find any evidence that's even remotely plausible, they don't dig any further."

Jusetsu looked down at her washbowl. The water was so cold that it seemed to chill her to the core.

"How were things in the inner palace when the emperor's grandfather was around...?" Jusetsu pulled herself together and continued to ask questions.

"I haven't heard much about the Flame Emperor's era."

The Flame Emperor was the posthumous title bestowed on the emperor-before-last.

The woman continued. "That's partly because I wasn't at the palace when he was around, but the fact that he was so old when he inherited the throne also has something to do with it. He never had many concubines in the first place, and things were difficult politically. It wasn't the right time to be messing around in the inner palace."

The Flame Emperor ascended to the throne when the previous emperor—the last from the previous dynasty—abdicated to ensure an orderly transfer of power. On paper, he may have been "given" the throne, but it wasn't so simple in reality. He blackmailed the existing emperor, and even after rising in power himself, it took him a while to finish purging his opposition.

"Hmm... But I *have* heard another story. Whenever the Flame Emperor paid a visit to his empress' palace, they'd leave the lanterns and lamps on all night long and spend all their time in the bright light. The reason for that was because ghosts would appear when night fell—the ghosts of the previous imperial family from the previous dynasty."

Ashu spoke in a low voice with a serious look on her face. “The ghost of the emperor had blood pouring from his mouth as he spouted out curses. On top of that, the empress, his heirs, and his young daughter would line up in front of the bed, all with their beautiful silver hair in disarray...”

People from this land tended to have black hair, but, as mysterious as it was, the previous dynasty’s imperial family all had the same silver hair color.

“The Flame Emperor was plagued by those ghosts until the day he died. He had killed too many of them.”

Her last few words had been so quiet that Jusetu could hardly make them out, but they carried with them a hint of condemnation.

After the Flame Emperor ascended the throne, he murdered the previous dynasty’s emperor, who had given him his rank. Not only that, but he also ordered the killing of the entire imperial family—including the women and children.

He’d done this to “eliminate the root of evil,” but even Jusetu remembered hearing the murmurs of city folk saying that he’d gone too far before she came to live in the inner palace.

“Argh! I won’t be able to sleep after hearing that story,” Jiujiu said in a tearful voice.

Ashu finally let out a laugh, then made another attempt to scare her. “You never know... They might still be here in the inner palace! They could be visiting *your* bed next!”

Jusetu suddenly rose to her feet and rubbed her wet hands against her skirt. *Joking about the dead doesn’t appeal to me*, she thought to herself. “That was very helpful. Sorry for disturbing you. Please accept my apologies.” With that, she turned away and left the washing area.

Jiujiu followed after her, flustered. “Are you okay, Jusetu? You don’t look too well.”

“I don’t?” Jusetu patted her cheeks.

“Are you bad with scary stories too? It’d be so freaky if a ghost appeared, wouldn’t it? It’s not like we can leave this place.”

“I’m not scared of ghosts,” Jusetu explained, “It’s just upsetting.”

“Wait, really? I’m *totally* petrified of them.”

Jiujiu clung to Jusetsu, acting afraid. Then, the two of them returned to the Hien Palace kitchen and carried on hulling the bracken roots.

By the time they sufficiently crushed the roots and submerged them in the water, it was well past noon. It was Jusetsu’s first time hulling with a pestle and her palms were red by the end of it, but it was easier work than the labor she was forced to do before coming to the inner palace.

When she left the kitchen, Jiujiu chased after her. “Take this,” she said, offering her some mugwort rice cakes with taro leaves underneath. “A thank-you for helping me.”

“...Thank you,” Jusetsu replied.

These sweet treats had likely been served for “tasting purposes,” a privilege that only the girls who worked as kitchen staff got to enjoy. When Jusetsu sat on the earthen jar next to her and brought a rice cake to her mouth, the scent of the mugwort filled the air. Jiujiu stuffed her cheeks with her portion too, and her eyes narrowed with glee as she enjoyed the delicious flavor.

“Are you sure you’re allowed to be away from your post for this long?” she asked Jusetsu. Jiujiu realized her new friend spent the whole morning at another palace.

“It won’t be an issue.”

“I guess the Yamei Palace must be pretty chill. I’m jealous. I wish I worked there too! Not that this place is particularly strict, but...”

And you get to steal some food, Jusetsu thought as she brought yet another rice cake to her mouth.

“Oh, but I bet it’s scary there, isn’t it? I heard there’s some kind of monstrous bird in there.”

“The bird is certainly unique...but I wouldn’t describe it as scary.”

“Huh, really?”

Once Jiujiu finished eating her rice cakes, she casually looked up at Jusetsu, who had turned to the side. She reached out her hand.

“Wait, are you going gray early? You’ve got some gray hair...”

Jusetsu quickly jumped to her feet and walked away from Jiujiu,

covering her hair with her hand.

“I’m sorry,” apologized Jiujiu. “Are you embarrassed about it? It’s not like it was enough to worry yourself over! Perhaps it was just the way the light was shining on it.”

“It’s not that...” Jusetsu said as she retreated, keeping her hand on her hair. “I’m going back now. Thank you for today.”

With that, Jusetsu rushed back toward the passageway. Jiujiu watched her as she left, a vacant look on her face.

The drum sounded to announce that it was midday, and Koshun vocalized his relief as he leaned back in his chair. This meant that his official duties in the outer part of the imperial estate were now finished for the day. It was also time for his officials, who had arrived before sunrise, to go home.

“Your Majesty,” Chief Secretariat Un whispered in Koshun’s ear just as he was getting up to leave the room. The grand chancellor had a magnificent white beard and previously acted as the grand master for the crown prince. The man had been close to the emperor since he was very young.

“Things don’t seem to be settling down in the Teirui Palace,” he told the emperor.

The Teirui Palace was the detached palace where the empress dowager lived in confinement.

“I know. Meiin?” Koshun called out, ushering an intelligent-looking man in his forties to his side. “How’s the money situation?”

“We haven’t found anything suspicious so far,” replied the man. He was a scholar and also served as the vice-minister in the palace’s financial affairs department. “I’m sure she’s hiding her fortune somewhere, though. It’s no surprise, considering how overzealous she was in issuing official titles by imperial decree.”

The empress dowager had constantly lined her own pockets by taking money from people in exchange for government positions. There was a discrepancy between the fortune that had been confiscated from

her and her estimated wealth.

“There must be some eunuchs pulling the strings,” said the emperor, looking at the chief of the palace staffing department.

The chief bowed his head in acquiescence. “I know.”

The empress dowager wasn’t the sort to meekly settle into a life of confinement. This woman had seduced and even intimidated the previous emperor into letting her take charge of both his external and internal affairs, and even drove Koshun to lose his position as heir. There were evidently some eunuchs who still maintained ties with her.

“At the end of the day, she does not understand what a compassionate fellow you are, Your Majesty.”

Once they’d finished devising some remedial measures, Un exited the room, stroking his white beard and sighing as he went. Then, Koshun headed to the inner court where he lived, taking Eisei along with him. Even with his work in the outer court done, there were still jobs he had to complete in the inner court. The emperor had a lot of business to attend to.

However... He hadn’t allowed the empress dowager to live because he was *compassionate*.

When he sent his troops from the imperial army rushing into the palace of the empress dowager—who was, at that time, the empress—he didn’t behead her, no. But that was only because he didn’t have the authority to get away with something like that at the time. If he’d had the powerful empress killed, the backlash would have been immense. He thought of it like a game of Go—you couldn’t seize power with just one stone. Just as a player had to take away their opponent’s Go stones one by one, Koshun slowly and steadily gained power in the imperial court from that point on.

But now, he *did* have the ability to punish her. As the emperor, he could use his will alone to execute her for a made-up crime—just as the empress dowager once could. That was what having power was all about.

Despite having the ability, Koshun wasn’t going to abuse his authority like that. He wanted cold, hard proof that would justify a punishment.

Koshun silently gazed ahead of him. He could see the Gyoko

Palace standing there, with his main residence inside of it. Far into the distance, too far away for him to make out, stood another palace named the Gyoso Palace. Long abandoned and deserted, its roof had fallen into disrepair and its walls were blackened by mold.

When Koshun was thirteen and had his status as heir ripped from him, they forced him out of the crown prince's palace and moved him there instead. Then, at the age of eighteen, he marched right into the empress' palace. Until he managed to regain his status as the crown prince, Koshun was destitute and barely had enough food to survive. If it hadn't been for Eisei and his other close advisers who secretly supported him, anything could have happened.

His mother, Consort Sha, was killed by poisoning before Koshun lost his heirship. One of the empress' eunuchs framed her lady-in-waiting as the culprit, and she was promptly executed as well. Still, there wasn't any clear proof that indicated that the empress was behind the plot either.

If Koshun were to kill the empress dowager without concrete evidence, that would have made him no different than her.

If he bulled through with his demands, things would eventually backfire. The emperor wasn't going to repeat the mistakes of the empress dowager. He wanted an undisputable reason that made perfect sense in terms of both law and logic. He wanted it so much that he could almost taste it.

Some described Koshun as a rational man. They said that he wasn't swayed by emotion and respected the law of the land. Some would also call him kindhearted.

Koshun believed both of these assumptions were wrong. None of them knew about the intense emotions that gnawed away at him.

He was aching to see the woman dead.

A room inside the Gyoko Palace was filled with the scent of tea. Eisei set the kettle on the stove and let the water boil. He took a pinch of salt out of its container and added it to the water. The way his movements flowed was beautiful to watch. Then he spooned the boiled tea into a cup, and reverently placed it in front of the emperor.

"Enjoy, master."

The gentle steam and the pure aroma of the tea enveloped Koshun as he took his first sip. The tea felt smooth in his mouth and filled his belly with warmth when he swallowed it down. All the tension in his body slowly dissipated.

“Your tea really is the best,” he commented.

Eisei’s eyes narrowed with delight. “That means a lot.”

Koshun met the eunuch at the age of ten and immediately recruited him as his personal attendant. Eisei knew Koshun’s preferences and opinions better than anyone.

“...How did it go?” the emperor asked, not specifying exactly what he was referring to.

After all, you never knew who was listening in from outside the room. Eisei would know what he meant.

“The osmanthus mark is that of the Yo family,” Eisei replied, sticking to only the essential details. Koshun had got him to look into the birthmark-like blemish on Jusetsu’s arm.

“If those marks were branded into her skin, she must have been one of their servants.”

“Correct.”

Koshun was quiet. Those marks, which looked like inflamed skin, were burn scars. That family branded their servants as if they were livestock.

Jusetsu once worked as a servant for the Yo family.

“That means...”

“The current head of the family works as a low-ranking official. His predecessor from many generations ago worked as a vice-minister for the board of personnel, but since then, none of them have been successful in the imperial examination.”

If you didn’t pass the imperial exam, you couldn’t gain a position as a high-ranking official. Many notable families had gone down in a similar way.

“Their reputation is less than satisfactory. Despite his position, they’ve got plenty of money. There are rumors that they are involved in salt trafficking, and it’s said that they treat their workers horribly too. Apparently, Jusetsu was sold to them at the age of four.”

Koshun frowned. *At such a young age?*

“I couldn’t find out any information about her life before that point. It wasn’t clear which vendor they bought her from.”

People ended up as servants for myriad different reasons—some had been working for a family for generations, others were poor farmers from deprived rural areas, some belonged to peoples that had been hunted down, and some came from good families who had fallen into poverty.

Going by Jusetsu’s appearance, however... You wouldn’t have been a fool to believe that she was a princess whose status was so distinguished that she’d been sealed away in a secluded inner room for her safety.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to get involved with a girl of unknown origins, personally,” Eisei said.

“I understand your concerns...but I must.”

Eisei pursed his lips. His expression suggested that although he would follow whatever Koshun said, he wasn’t convinced. It wasn’t the first time Koshun had seen it.

“It’s not like the empress dowager’s cronies will know why I’m visiting the Raven Consort, and they probably don’t know what to do. It’s better that the Raven Consort makes her presence known—that’ll work in my favor.”

Then, Koshun lowered his voice even more to pose Eisei a question. “Have your people said anything to you?”

“The eunuch and court lady in question have not made any moves as of yet,” Eisei whispered back.

Koshun had placed several of Eisei’s subordinates to work undercover in strategic places as spies.

“It’d make life easier for me if they got to work right away.”

It would be by no means difficult to kill the empress dowager’s allies. She was unaware that Koshun was just choosing not to do so. The woman thought she still held her power, but it had already slipped out of her hands.

Koshun was taking her stones away one at a time, driving her into a corner and blocking her exits. He’d been doing this ever since he put

her into confinement.

He would never forgive that woman for brutally murdering his mother and his friend.

The room was bright and full of daylight, but a gloomy shadow surrounded the emperor. Something bluish black was gnawing its way up from his toes, and he felt as if he was decaying from the inside. Even so, he couldn't stop. He let the raging hatred and anger in his chest destroy his heart with its icy grip.

"We're almost there now..." the emperor whispered, so quietly that even Eisei may not have heard him.

He then drank the rest of his tea.

She should have known better, but she knew it was only a matter of time.

Jusetsu covered her head until she got back to the Yamei Palace. Once she was home, she took a sandalwood box out of her cabinet and placed it on her table. She then brought over her druggist's mortar from its place on a shelf in the kitchen. This tool was primarily used for grinding up medicinal plants. Jusetsu opened the lid to the box and threw some dried green alder fruits and areca nuts inside. With that done, she began to grind the ingredients as if she'd done so a million times before.

She pulverized the fruits and nuts—the finer they were, the better. As she intently ground away at them, Shinshin, who'd been sitting at her feet, suddenly began flapping its wings and rampaging about. Startled, Jusetsu started to turn around to ask it what was wrong, but when she saw what was upsetting Shinshin, she almost screamed.

There was a person standing there—Eisei.

"Wh-where did you appear from?"

Nobody had opened the front doors.

"I came in through the back entrance in order to evade notice," he explained with an icy look on his face. Eisei glimpsed at the druggist's mortar, but soon shifted his gaze back to Jusetsu herself, seemingly

uninterested by it. “Did the clothes come in handy?”

Jusetsu looked down at her court lady disguise. Her heart was still racing from the shock, but Jusetsu gave a simple nod so that Eisei wouldn’t notice. “Yes, indeed they did.”

“In what way?” he asked politely, wanting to hear how the plan unfolded.

Jusetsu frowned but went on to explain what happened. “I gathered some information from one of the court ladies. The ghost with the earring may be that of the warbler lady that died during the reign of the previous emperor.”

“Warbler lady...” Eisei murmured.

“Does that ring a bell?”

“I’ve been master’s personal attendant for the whole time I’ve been here, so there’s a lot I don’t know about the previous emperor’s inner palace—especially if it was something that happened while the emperor was stripped of his heirship.”

“In that case, are you able to find out where the women who worked as her lady-in-waiting and maids are now?”

Eisei looked troubled. “In order to do that, I would have to inspect the records in the inner palace registry, and I’d need a reason to do so— if I were to try to access them without one, it would appear suspicious. Master told you as much yesterday, didn’t he? We don’t want anybody else to find out what we’re doing.”

What a nuisance, Jusetsu thought, fed up. “Let’s try another angle, then,” she suggested.

Eisei looked at her, intrigued.

“I would like to be assigned a lady-in-waiting.”

“...A lady-in-waiting?” Eisei repeated apprehensively. *After all this time?* he thought, skeptical of her intentions.

“I want a girl called Jiujiu to take on the role. She’s a member of the palace kitchen staff. I’m not familiar with her last name.”

“What?” Eisei exclaimed.

“We can make it look like you’re reading the court lady records in order to select a lady-in-waiting for me. The fact that you’re providing me with one wouldn’t be a lie, so there’d be nothing unusual about it.

How does that sound?"

Eisei's eyes opened slightly wider with surprise. He then bowed. "Understood."

With their conversation concluded, Jusetsu thought Eisei was leaving—but before he turned to face the back entrance, he stepped close to Jusetsu and whispered something into her ear.

"Those are green alder fruits and areca nuts, aren't they?"

Jusetsu looked uncomfortable.

Eisei touched Jusetsu's hair, then took his hand away again.

"Who exactly *are* you?"

Late that night, Jusetsu left the Yamei Palace and headed for the small pond on the western side of it. With no flames in the hanging lanterns, only the moonlight illuminated her surroundings. It was quiet too—all you could hear were the insects moving in the grass.

Jusetsu held a small bowl in her hands. Inside it sat the powder made from the green alder and areca nuts, which was then combined with ashes and other ingredients and mixed with hot water.

Jusetsu stepped into the pond, not caring if her nightwear got soaked through. She bent over and dunked her loose hair in the water. It was still cold at this time of year, and the fact that it was so late at night only made it worse. As freezing cold as she was, Jusetsu carried on washing her hair. Little by little, Jusetsu's black hair lost its color. As she tangled her fingers through it, her hair shined in the moonlight—it was an alarmingly brilliant shade of silver.

That was Jusetsu's natural hair color. Ever since she was brought to the Yamei Palace, she would dye her long locks black and used makeup on her eyelashes and eyebrows. When she was a servant, the dust and sand from her work turned her hair dirty and gray. It was unusual, but people just thought her hair was white, a shade that people's hair turned as they got older. As a result, she was able to narrowly escape being killed for it.

After all, silver hair was proof that you were a member of the previous dynasty's imperial family.

That clan originated from a people who had migrated here from

the north. It was said that they might have been descendants of a clan that once ruled the land, or maybe they were descendants of a priest, but nobody really knew where they came from. Perhaps they only concocted those stories to make them sound more important.

They were a minority people who lived in the highlands, but their conflicts with rival groups and tendency to intermarry brought them to the edge of extinction. As a result, those that remained left their land.

Members of this clan had certain unique characteristics. They had defined noses and receding chins. Their eyes were large, and their limbs were long and thin. Most notably, however, they had silver hair—a feature that no other clan possessed. The majority of people who inherited the clan's blood also had silver hair.

After the Flame Emperor ascended the throne, he was determined to wipe out the previous dynasty's imperial family. This meant leaving no stone unturned when it came to hunting down any relatives that had got away. He killed every single one of them, including any young children.

Jusetsu's family was able to avoid the wrath of the sword for one reason. Her mother was still an infant at the time and was the daughter of a servant girl—a position with a vastly different social status—so she was not officially recognized as royalty. Therefore, she was able to avoid being on the registry of people the emperor demanded executed and blended in with the city by dyeing her hair. There was an irony in this situation too.

Later, Jusetsu's mother ended up becoming a prostitute in the entertainment district and gave birth to Jusetsu. If Jusetsu had had black hair, there wouldn't have been a problem...but her hair was silver too.

Her mother prayed that this hair color would be a blessing rather than a curse—and so, she named her Jusetsu, a name written using the characters for “longevity” and “snow.” She dyed Jusetsu's hair and raised her in secret, shielding her from the outside world.

She didn't know how her secret got out, or from where. On one late afternoon, the brothel-keeper brought some soldiers from the southern defense army to the brothel. As everyone else stalled for time to help their friend get away, the young mother fled with her tiny daughter.

The soldiers chased Jusetu's mother as she struggled to get away through the hustle and bustle of the alleyways with her daughter in her arms, but it seemed as though the person the soldiers were really looking for was the mother herself. They had no idea that she was raising Jusetu in secret. Naturally, the other girls in the brothel were aware, so the person who tipped them off must have been someone from the outside. It could have even been the work of a customer who Jusetu's mother had left hanging. No one would ever know what the truth was.

Once Jusetu's mother realized that it was only her that the soldiers were pursuing, she sat Jusetu by a city gate in a place she couldn't be spotted. She gave her daughter some firm instructions.

"Hide here. Make sure you don't come out, even if you hear something." Her mother dug her fingers hard into Jusetu's shoulders. "Stay put and don't move. Don't make a sound. Then, when the gate closes, leave before nightfall and go home. Do you understand?" she whispered quickly.

Then, Jusetu's mother gave her daughter a tight hug, and ran out of the gate.

Moments later, the angry roars of the soldiers could be heard, and a violent racket broke out.

It sounded as if bowls were being smashed and fences were being kicked down. Someone was wailing as well. Jusetu cowered in fear. Was that her mother's voice? Jusetu was dying to do something, but her legs wouldn't move. They were shaking too much. If she came out, she'd be caught too. She didn't understand why she wasn't allowed to run away, but she could tell by the way her mother was acting that if the soldiers were to catch her, she'd be in deep trouble. She was frightened. The crashing sounds of objects breaking and the ferocious men yelling made her freeze in terror. *I have to go and save my mother*, she thought to herself—but she couldn't even manage to stand up.

She heard another cry. Jusetu covered her ears with both hands and closed her eyes tight. Shuddering, she waited for it to be over.

Eventually, the commotion died down. She took her hands off her ears, which now hurt from being pressed down so hard. The young girl slowly stood up. She left the gate and tried to follow where the noise had come from, but apart from sullen-looking shopkeepers whose storefront stools had been broken and employees who were tidying up

broken bowls, people were going about their business as if nothing had happened. Jusetsu had no idea whether or not her mother had been arrested, and if so, where they would have taken her. Jusetsu walked around aimlessly at a total loss. Her mother had told her to return to the brothel, but since she'd been carried to her hiding spot, the four-year-old Jusetsu didn't know her way back.

In such a busy city, nobody batted an eyelid at the sight of a child wandering around aimlessly. At most, the stall owners would drive her away to make sure she didn't steal their food. While the young girl was still roaming around, the sun went down, and the city gate was shut.

"Mommy," Jusetsu murmured.

She cried herself to sleep that night, leaning against the gate for support.

They found her mother the following day. Nobody knew where she ended up—but it was likely the gallows.

Her head was put up on public display.

Her hair was back to its original silver color. The strands were bloodstained and stuck to her face. Her dry lips hung open slightly, as if she was still trying to say something to her daughter.

The previous Raven Consort later told Jusetsu that she was executed for treason. They said she may have posed a threat to the emperor.

Jusetsu found herself squatting down at the side of the road. She hadn't eaten anything since she got away, but she didn't feel hungry. Her mind felt emptier than her stomach, and she couldn't bring herself to move.

After that, some vendors noticed her and sold her to the Yo family—whose familial name was written the same way as "poplar"—as a servant girl. By that point, all of the color had come out of her dyed hair, but everyone around her presumed that her dingy white hair was simply due to the back-breaking work she was forced to carry out.

One fall day about two years later, an arrow came flying through the air and pierced the roof of the entrance to the Yo family's property.

Sir Yo was initially bemused and furious about this, but when a messenger turned up from the imperial estate, his face turned a very different color.

The arrow glistened with gold. It wasn't beautiful as one would expect—its luster was actually quite bizarre.

The messenger took Juseitsu to the imperial estate. Juseitsu wondered if she was going to be killed, but she had no desire to resist. Ever since she had forsaken her mother and saw her head on display, Juseitsu had just felt empty inside.

Once they passed through a gate on the western side of the estate, the messenger led Juseitsu to a large palace inside the grounds. It was the Yamei Palace, and the messenger was a eunuch.

Inside the palace, there was an old woman wearing a beautiful robe—the Raven Consort at that time, Reijo. She told Juseitsu that the arrow was a shapeshifted feather of a golden chicken and that it had been sent to locate the next Raven Consort.

Reijo looked at Juseitsu with a tinge of sorrow in her eyes.

"You must now reside here, in this palace. What a fate," she said with a sigh of grief.

After that, Reijo explained to Juseitsu why her mother was forced to run away, and why she and her mother had silver hair. Reijo knew everyone and everything.

If people found out who Juseitsu really was, she would meet the same fate as her mother. However, since she was the chosen one, Juseitsu had no choice but to see out her life in the Yamei Palace.

Reijo dyed Juseitsu's hair and raised her with the rule to never leave the palace unless completely necessary. Even at the time of her death, she still worried herself about Juseitsu's future.

Reijo taught the young girl how to read and write, how to speak correctly, and how to use her abilities as the Raven Consort. Juseitsu wasn't born with any strange skills, but she mysteriously developed them after coming to the Yamei Palace. Under Reijo's tutelage, she learned to use them at will.

Thanks to Reijo, Juseitsu—who had, at one time, felt empty—was now fulfilled again. The older woman provided her with all kinds of things, including knowledge, wisdom, and love.

And yet, deep inside her heart, something was missing. Juseitsu didn't think anything could fix it.

Juseitsu got up out of the water and wrung out her soaked hair.

Now, she was going to dye it again. She kneeled by the side of the pond and reached out for the bowl that contained the dye—but right at that very moment, she sensed someone’s presence.

She lifted her head, looking startled. Then she gulped.

Koshun was standing on the opposite side of the pond, with Eisei behind him. They were too far away for Jusetsu to read the expressions of their faces, but she was sure that they had gotten a good look at her silver hair, glistening in the moonlight.

Jusetsu stood up and started running as fast as she could. She rushed back to the palace and closed the doors behind her. As soon as she was inside, she sunk down onto the ground.

They know. They know my secret.

There was no way that the emperor didn’t know what her silver hair signified. She had been so stupid. She should have been more careful. It was all because she was rushing, thinking she needed to redye it as quickly as she could. When Eisei pointed out the green alder fruits and areca nuts, she told him it was medicine. That wasn’t a total lie—those ingredients *could* be used to make medicines after all. However, the fact that he pointed it out at all had put her in even more of a frenzy. She wanted to dye her hair right away before anyone got any strange suspicions. Reijo always told her that rushing was the leading cause of failure, but on this occasion, she ignored her mentor’s advice.

It was all over. Jusetsu was going to be executed.

Someone quietly tapped on the doors. Jusetsu’s body tensed up.

“You left your bowl by the pond. I’ll leave it here, okay?”

It was Koshun’s voice. A few moments of silence followed. Jusetsu gulped and listened carefully, expecting Koshun to say something else.

“Make sure you dry yourself off properly, all right? You’ll get sick otherwise.”

Then, after telling her that he was going to head home, Jusetsu heard footsteps trailing away from the doors. Jusetsu got up from the floor and opened the door slightly.

Koshun turned around at the sound.

“...Don’t you have anything else to say?” Jusetsu asked, her voice

trembling.

Koshun's face remained emotionless. "No," he replied, "Tonight, I saw nothing."

Jusetsu held her breath. She replayed his words in her head countless times, wondering what he meant.

As if having read her mind, Koshun added, "I mean exactly what I said."

Then he turned away from Jusetsu and descended the stairs. Eisei, who was waiting at the bottom, followed behind him, and they went back into the passageways. Jusetsu watched them walk away until they were out of sight.

After noontime the following day, Koshun paid her another visit. This time, he was accompanied by not only Eisei, but by a young girl as well.

"We've brought you that lady-in-waiting you asked for."

The young girl was indeed Jiujiu. Having been brought to the palace with little notice, she looked around apprehensively.

Jusetsu glimpsed up at Koshun's face. He was wearing the same expression as always. It was the same emotionless look that he had when he first visited the Yamei Palace.

I wonder what he's thinking, thought the Raven Consort. *Is he really going to pretend he saw nothing yesterday? And why?*

Confused by his intentions, Jusetsu became lost in thought—until she heard a quiet voice hesitantly saying her name. When she looked up, Jiujiu's eyes were wide as saucers.

"That is indeed me," Jusetsu replied. "Thank you for your kindness yesterday."

Jiujiu's mouth was now gaping open with surprise too. "Wait... what? What's all this about? Didn't you tell me you were a court lady?"

"I am the Raven Consort. My apologies for deceiving you."

"What?!" Jiujiu exclaimed again, clasping her hands against her cheeks in bewilderment.

"I would like you to be my lady-in-waiting. Not that I have

anything for you to do, but...”

“Your lady-in-waiting... But why me?”

“You told me you wanted to work in the Yamei Palace.”

“Well, sure, but...” Jiujiu seemed perplexed.

“Did I misunderstand?” Jusetsu asked.

Jiujiu’s initial enthusiasm about working in the Yamei Palace made Jusetsu think she’d be perfect for the job, and that was why she recommended her to Eisei.

“You see, it was just an offhand comment. Like, a spur-of-the-moment thing...” Jiujiu scanned the room uncomfortably as she trailed off.

So that’s what it was, thought Jusetsu, looking down.

After spending the previous day with Jiujiu, Jusetsu thought it might be fun to spend some more time together.

“It wouldn’t be for very long. But if you’re opposed to the idea...”

Jusetsu never intended to have a lady-in-waiting. It was just an excuse to look at the court lady records, and she was scared that her lady-in-waiting would find out her secret if she were constantly by her side.

“Sei, give it to her,” Koshun, who had been watching the pair’s conversation in silence, instructed the eunuch beside him.

Eisei held out a tray with a robe on it to Jiujiu. “This will be your uniform as lady-in-waiting. Please put this on.”

Jiujiu stared at the robe. “I-is it really okay for me to wear that? It’s so fancy...”

“And you’re her lady-in-waiting,” Koshun interrupted.

“If you prefer being a member of the palace kitchen staff, I can pick someone else,” Jusetsu suggested.

“No! Don’t be so absurd! I will gladly accept your offer.”

Jiujiu held the robe to her chest. When she met Koshun’s gaze, she looked down with embarrassment. Her face was bright red. Jusetsu had mixed feelings about the fact that this one robe had been the thing to seal the deal—and so quickly, as well.

Once Jiujiu went down to the lady-in-waiting’s dressing room to

get changed, Koshun began to speak.

“Now, as for the main subject at hand,” he said, sounding as indifferent as ever, “thanks to you, we were able to look into the court lady records. Han Ojo had two court ladies working for her—one lady-in-waiting, and one maidservant who attended to her. The maidservant died of an illness.”

“An illness...?”

“I don’t know the details. The lady-in-waiting was assigned to another consort after Han Ojo passed away, but she’s now in the cleansing quarters.”

The cleansing quarters was where they sent court ladies who were getting on in their years or were guilty of a crime.

“Her name is So Kogyo. Incidentally, it seems like no other consorts have hung themselves or been strangled to death.”

In that case, the ghost had to be that of Han Ojo. Jusetsu stroked the belt to her robe. She had the jade earring tucked beneath it.

“Well then, I must go and see her.”

“You’re going to the cleansing quarters?”

A tinge of confusion appeared on Koshun’s emotionless face as he looked at Eisei.

“It’s not the kind of place that the Raven Consort should step foot in,” he explained.

Jusetsu snorted. That wasn’t the kind of thing you would usually say to a former servant.

“I don’t mind. If we see her, we can find out whether that earring really belonged to Han Ojo.”

Right at that moment, Jiujiu turned up, wearing her new uniform.

“Jiujiu, we’re going out.”

“Huh? Where to, my lady? Wait, no—I mean, where doth we depart to, niangniang?” asked Jiujiu, adjusting her speech.

Jusetsu didn’t respond and parted the fine silk curtains covering the back part of the room. Her court lady clothes were still lying on the bed where she took them off previously.

“I’m going to get changed now. Please leave,” she said to Koshun

and Eisei.

Koshun silently got up from his seat, and annoyance flashed across Eisei's face for a brief moment. Shocked to hear Jusetsu issuing orders to the emperor, Jiujiu darted her eyes about in bewilderment.

Before the two men even had the chance to leave the room, Jusetsu drew the curtains and undid her belt.

"A-are you really going there, niangniang?" Jiujiu asked as she followed after Jusetsu, on the verge of tears.

Niangniang was a term of respect used to refer not only to female deities, but also to address women of higher status.

"I said that from the offset. And stop calling me 'niangniang.' I'm a court lady now, so talk to me normally."

"But..."

Jiujiu was frowning worriedly. She wasn't sure how much distance to keep between herself and Jusetsu to be proper.

The two young women headed for the southwest area of the inner palace. As they crossed a stream atop a red-painted bridge, Jiujiu suddenly cowered and hid behind Jusetsu. Just as she was wondering what was happening, through the leaves of the willow that was planted by the stream, Jusetsu spotted a court lady on the other side. It was the palace cataloger who had haughtily ordered Jiujiu to sew her robe for her just the other day. The woman seemed to be rushing toward the Hien Palace and hadn't noticed Jiujiu and Jusetsu.

"She's gone now," Jusetsu said.

Jiujiu cautiously lifted her head and looked at the other side of the stream to make sure Jusetsu was right. Confirming it, she let out a sigh of relief.

"You said she was speaking to a eunuch from the Hien Palace, didn't you? It looks like she visits him very regularly. Surely she must have work of her own to do."

"She does. She denied it, though. She insisted she'd never *dream* of associating with a lowly eunuch, and that other people just asked her to do it. She told me not to tell anyone that they exchange letters either."

"Other people?"

“She claimed that the other court ladies ask her to pass on their letters on their behalf—but if that was true, couldn’t they do it themselves? She’s just hiding it because she’s embarrassed.”

“Really?” Jusetsu said, tilting her head to the side. She was intrigued. That court lady certainly didn’t seem the type to help other people swap letters out of the kindness of her heart.

They started walking again and crossed the bridge. They passed through several gardens, made their way down the walled corridor, and went past another palace building. Before long, the landscape around them turned bleak. There were no more beautiful gardens in sight, and the buildings looked utilitarian. They were the lodgings where the assistants lived.

The cleansing quarters were located at the edge of the inner palace grounds. Waterways of varying sizes flowed through the imperial estate, but at the edge of the inner palace, the land was low and drainage was poor. As a result, it was constantly damp in this area, and the buildings were covered in mold and moss. This was the part of the inner palace where the banished were sent, so here on the outskirts, it was almost like a garbage heap of unpleasant, low-ranking eunuchs and court ladies. You had to watch your back there. The closer you got to the cleansing quarters, the crumbling sections of the walled corridor become more and more prevalent. The roofs were coming loose and falling off in parts as well. Whereas there had previously been gravel on the path, they were now walking on bare, unlevel ground with weeds sprouting out between rocks. One red-faced eunuch leaned against the wall, asleep—perhaps having spent the day drinking cheap booze—while others just stared at Jusetsu and her companion, trying to size them up. Jiujiu moved closer behind Jusetsu, frightened.

“It’s okay,” Jusetsu reassured her.

They wouldn’t dare pick a fight just for the fun of it, and it wouldn’t be that big of a deal if they did—at least not unless they had murderous intent.

Unfortunately, however, this scenario wasn’t as unlikely as it may have seemed.

The two eunuchs who were staring at Jusetsu began staggering up to them, unsteady on their feet. When Jusetsu got ready to defend herself, yet another pair of eunuchs appeared from behind the dilapidated corridor wall. They were all wearing robes that identified

them as low-ranking eunuchs, and the men had piercing looks in their eyes. Just as Jusetsu realized they didn't seem like just any loutish eunuchs, they whipped daggers out of their breast pockets. The blades glinted in the light, and Jiujiu let out a raspy scream. In a matter of seconds, the men surrounded them.

"What do you think you are doing?" Jusetsu demanded.
"We aren't carrying any valuables."

The men didn't answer and slowly drew closer, not saying a word. *This might not end well*, Jusetsu thought to herself, getting nervous.

She brought her hand to her hair knot, but then remembered that she didn't have a peony there right now as she was dressed as a court lady. She tutted, lowered her hand, and faced her palm toward the sky.

Heat gathered in the palm of her hand. The air quivered in a way that resembled the haze of heat on a summer day, and right at that moment, a light crimson flower petal appeared on her hand. One petal materialized after another, coalesced, and they gradually formed a peony flower out of thin air.

When the eunuchs saw this, they froze in awe. They looked at each other, puzzled, and then tried to work out what moves their allies were going to make next. Jusetsu held onto the glimmer of hope that her trick would creep them out and make them leave, but it didn't seem to have worked out that way.

Instead, one of the eunuchs let out a spirited cry and charged forward.

Jusetsu blew on the flower.

With just that, the flower turned into a gust of wind and rushed toward the eunuchs. The men's screams rang out against the sharp blades of air. Jusetsu took this opportunity to grab Jiujiu by the hand and tried to slip between the eunuchs.

"Argh!" Jiujiu cried out. One of the eunuchs had grabbed the young woman by the collar.

"Jiujiu!"

Jusetsu went to use her skills against the dagger-brandishing eunuch again, but she wasn't quick enough. She pushed off the ground with her foot and was just about to step between the blade and Jiujiu when the eunuch fell flat on his side.

“What the hell do you think you’re playing at?”

Another eunuch had slammed into the troublesome one from the side. He had a friendly-looking face with droopy eyes and appeared to be in his thirties.

“Why would you want to mug court ladies as lovely as these?” he yelled, his voice raised in anger.

The kind man was leaning over the fallen eunuch, trying to take his dagger from him. The eunuch on the ground kicked his stomach, then sat up, still holding his weapon. He tried to point its blade toward the man who came to help, but a small rock came flying toward him and smashed into his hand. He let out a cry and dropped his dagger at the same time.

Another groan then came from a different direction. When they turned to see who was there, they found a younger eunuch twisting the dagger-wielding eunuch’s arms and pressing them against the ground. No one knew how long he had been there, but that wasn’t all he had done. The other eunuchs were also holding onto their arms and legs, groaning in pain as they did so. The young eunuch must have hit them hard as well, quickly and before anyone even had the chance to blink.

“Retreat!”

Flustered, the quarrelsome eunuchs attempted to get away. The young eunuch let go of the man whose arms he was holding against the ground. The man hastily stood up and chased after his friends, who had got away first. He stumbled and fell as he went.

“Are you hurt, niangniang?”

The young eunuch turned to face Jusetsu. She didn’t recognize him, but she noticed that his wide, almond eyes with single-edged lids were particularly beautiful. Even the scar that ran across his cheek in the shape of a straight line just looked like another alluring embellishment.

“My name is Onkei, and I have been ordered by Attendant Ei to provide security for you. I have been following you in secret. Please excuse my impertinence.”

With a well-proportioned and slim body, Onkei bowed with his arms folded.

“Oh, I see. Eisei did...”

Eisei was the kind of man who left nothing to chance.

“Thank you for rescuing me. Who were those men? They didn’t seem like just any old armed robbers.”

“I’m not sure, but I expect they work for the empress dowager.”

“The empress dowager...” *Wasn’t she supposed to be locked away?* Jusetu wondered. *And why would they attack me now, of all times?* “Now, that reminds me...”

Jusetu scanned her surroundings. She was looking for the eunuch who had come to help her first, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Wasn’t that eunuch one of Eisei’s underlings?”

“I am not familiar with him. Perhaps he just happened to be passing by.”

With his dark gray robe and black hat, the man was dressed like a low-ranking eunuch. If he *did* just happen to be walking by, he must have been an extremely chivalrous man to dive in among those dagger-wielding hooligans. If Jusetu ever got the chance to see him again, she would have to thank him.

“Jiujiu, are you unhurt?” Jusetu said.

When she turned around to face her, she found the young girl slumped over and on the verge of tears.

“Are you all right?”

When Jusetu reached out her hand, Jiujiu clung onto it and started crying.

“I am sorry. I never should have let you get tangled up in that dangerous situation. Return to the Yamei Palace—I will join you there later.”

Jusetu looked up at Onkei to ask him to walk the young woman home, but Jiujiu shook her head and let go of her hand.

“No. I’m coming with you,” said Jiujiu, wiping away her tears.

“But...”

“You tried to save me, didn’t you?” She was talking about the moment when Jusetu cut in between Jiujiu and the eunuch’s dagger. “I’m coming with you,” she repeated again, with an audible snuffle.

“...Thank you.”

For some reason or another, Jusetsu felt a prickly feeling in her chest. This was the first time she had ever experienced that sensation.

Jusetsu stood in front of the cleansing quarters with Jiujiu to her left and Onkei to her right. The gate that served as the entrance had half-collapsed and tilted to one side. The gateposts were practically crumbling down. When they walked through it, they spotted some haggard court ladies dressed in mud-colored ruqun, washing clothes in washbowls. The women all looked sickly, and some of them were up in their years as well. When Jusetsu walked past them, they didn't even look up. Jiujiu nestled in close to Jusetsu's arm and looked around fearfully.

They referred to this place as the "court ladies' grave."

They stepped into a building topped with mossy roof tiles. It smelled musty inside—and it was no wonder, considering the walls were covered in mold stains. The eunuch in charge of the place led them toward a room at the back.

"This is So Kogyo's room," he said, "but you're wasting your time if you're expecting her to answer your questions."

"Why's that?"

"When you see her, you'll find out."

The eunuch bid them goodbye and walked away. The room had no door but was instead shielded by a slightly stained curtain. While Onkei stood in front of it on guard, Jusetsu ventured inside.

In the small room that awaited her, she found a simple bed by a window with a woman lying in it. The eunuch had warned them that she'd been laid up with a fever for a day. The cleansing quarters also housed many court ladies who were no longer able to work due to illness.

Her wrinkles were so deep that at first glance, Jusetsu mistook her for an elderly woman, but upon closer inspection, she didn't seem that old at all.

"Are you...So Kogyo?" she asked, leaning over the bed.

The woman opened her eyes slightly and looked up at her. She let her gaze wander, but no response came. When Jusetsu went to repeat her question, the woman opened her mouth.

Jusetsu backed off in surprise. There was no tongue inside the woman's mouth.

The woman followed Jusetsu with her eyes and made a slight noise, but no words came. Jusetsu figured that she was probably trying to say something along the lines of, "yes."

Now it was clear why the eunuch told her that they would be wasting their time.

There was no way she could answer anything they asked. Jusetsu had heard that on rare occasions, court ladies had their tongues cut off as a form of punishment, but she didn't *really* think that happened. It was a terrible thing to do to someone.

I'll have to stick to yes or no questions that she can answer by moving her head, Jusetsu thought.

"I am the Raven Consort. I live in the Yamei Palace. I came here because I have some things to ask you." Jusetsu took the earring in question out from underneath her belt. "Would you happen to recognize..."

She had planned on adding "this earring" to the end of her sentence, but before she had the chance, Kogyo's expression visibly changed.

The woman opened her eyes wide, and a mix of fear and surprise appeared on her face. She kept trying to say something, but all that came from her mouth was drool and groaning noises.

"Did this belong to Han Ojo?"

Kogyo nodded over and over again in confirmation. Then, she began incessantly moving her mouth and repeatedly made gestures as if she was writing something with her hand.

"...Would you like to write something down?" Jusetsu asked, and Kogyo gave her a forceful nod.

Jusetsu looked back at Jiujiu. "Get that eunuch to lend us a writing brush and paper."

Jiujiu went outside, but returned a few moments later, looking defeated. "He said they don't keep things like that here. And she doesn't know how to write, so she wouldn't be able to communicate that way anyway..."

Jusetsu looked at Kogyo. She shook her head and stared right back at her. The look in Kogyo's eyes was fierce, a far cry from the lifeless shell of a woman she appeared to be when they first saw her lying in bed.

"In that case, let us take her to the Yamei Palace. Onkei, carry her for me."

He wrapped Kogyo in a thin quilt and lifted her up. As they were about to take her outside, the guard eunuch caught up with them, flustered.

"Hey, you can't just take her away with you!"

"I'm the Raven Consort," Jusetsu said. "I am within my rights to take this woman away. If anybody complains, tell them to come to the Yamei Palace."

Upon hearing the name "Raven Consort," the eunuch retreated, taken aback. She was *the* Raven Consort, rumored to specialize in curses of all kinds, including cursing people to death. Not even the eunuchs who lit the lanterns dared to get close to the Yamei Palace.

Once they had taken Kogyo out of the cleansing quarters, Jusetsu and the others hurried back home.

As there were no court ladies stationed at the Yamei Palace, there were several empty rooms. They put Kogyo to bed in one of them, and Jusetsu fetched her some hemp paper and a writing brush. Jiujiu ground some ink in the inkstone, then placed it on Kogyo's bedside table. Kogyo sat up and took the brush in hand.

"I got one of the court ladies in the cleansing palace to teach me letters," she began to write, in shoddy handwriting. *"I'm sure they would kill me if they found out I knew how to write, so I pretended I couldn't."*

Jusetsu frowned when she saw the words, *they would kill me*.

Kogyo kept on writing. *"They killed the servant girl, but it would attract too much attention if they killed a lady-in-waiting. Instead, they cut off my tongue so I wouldn't be able to speak."*

The servant girl she was talking about must have been the maid. The registry said she passed away due to illness, but now, it sounded like it was more likely murder.

"They made me work as another consort's lady-in-waiting, made up a crime, and cut off my tongue as a punishment."

Her overwhelming desire to write may have gotten the better of her as her letters were all jumbled up. She bit her lip, looking frustrated.

"Who would do such a thing? Who was it that wanted to kill you?"

Kogyo's hand trembled. She took in a deep breath, then carefully wrote out her next letters. *"The empress dowager."*

Kogyo went on to explain that the empress dowager had poisoned the Magpie Consort. The Magpie Consort was the emperor's third-ranking consort. She was the daughter of the chief vassal and was young. She was said to be pregnant when she was murdered. And that was the incident that Han Ojo was accused of.

"The Magpie Consort was pregnant. Her father, the chief vassal, wasn't on the empress dowager's side, so they put the blame on poor Han Ojo. They bribed the servant girl to put the wolf's bane in her cupboard. I saw her doing it. But..."

That was where Kogyo stopped writing. She drifted the tip of her brush through the air a few times again and again, but then bit hard on her lip and put it down.

"I ended up obeying the eunuch's orders too. He told me he would kill my family at home, so I left Han Ojo to die." Kogyo shuddered, then paused her writing.

"I learned to write in the hope that one day, I would at the very least be able to let people know the truth. I take it that you are on Han Ojo's side if you have her earring."

"What?"

Kogyo looked up. *"Am I wrong?"* she wrote.

Jusetsu didn't know why Kogyo assumed she was an ally of Han Ojo's, but then explained that Koshun had picked up the earring in the inner palace and that it was haunted by her ghost.

When Kogyo heard the word "ghost," she turned pale. *"Han Ojo's ghost?"* she wrote.

"If this earring did belong to her, then it must be," Jusetsu replied,

showing her the earring that was sitting in her palm.

"The earring is definitely hers. I remember it well. It sticks in my memory because she only had the one, you see."

"Only one?"

"Yes. She only had one, but niangniang always insisted on wearing it anyway."

The "niangniang" she was referring to must have been Han Ojo. Kogyo stared off into space—she seemed to be thinking back on something.

"She told me about it once. She said that she gave one of the earrings to her fiancé in her hometown."

"Fiancé?"

"Niangniang was engaged to someone since she was a child, but her father was an official here and forced her into the inner palace. Before she came, she gave one of her earrings to him. Whenever she touched it, she thought of him."

She continued writing. *"Niangniang wasn't a cheerful person, but she was kind. My family owned a small noodle shop, but I was picked to work here as a court lady. Most of the other court ladies come from surprisingly respectable backgrounds, and I struggled as I couldn't read or write very well and had no education. Niangniang couldn't allow herself to stand by and watch, so she took me in as her lady-in-waiting. And yet..."*

Kogyo stopped momentarily. Quickly after, though, she seemed to pull herself together again and went on. *"One day, niangniang ended up giving that earring to someone."*

"Really?"

"When she came back from the courtyard, she wasn't wearing it anymore. I was surprised and thought she dropped it, so I asked her where it went. Instead, she smiled and told me she gave it away to someone—someone who was crying, apparently. Maybe they were upset about something that happened in the inner palace. I'm sure they knew what a kind person niangniang was. Niangniang would never even dream of poisoning anyone."

"So that's why I wondered whether you were the person she gave the earring to, or someone else who knew them. If so, you would have known that she was innocent."

Kogyo put down the writing brush and exhaled. Jusetsu placed a hand on her forehead. It was hot. The woman's temperature might have gone up from exertion.

"All right. You should rest for a while," Jusetsu said, but Kogyo had other ideas.

She picked up the brush again and quickly wrote something down. *"Niangniang wasn't just framed for something she didn't do. She was murdered. The eunuchs murdered her. Please find a way to punish them. I will accept my punishment too."*

That was all Kogyo managed to write before she passed out. Jusetsu let her lay down and used the leftover hemp paper to write down the names of three items—thorow wax, goldthread, and crow-dipper—and gave the paper to Onkei.

"Tell the medicinal department to prepare these treatments for me," she said.

Onkei left the room immediately with the paper in hand. Jusetsu left Jiujiu to look after Kogyo and went back to her own room. She placed the earring on the table and stared at it.

She was killed for a crime she didn't commit. That must have been why Han Ojo ended up as a ghost and was haunting the earring.

Who did she give it to? That person probably dropped it. Since it was found in the inner palace, that meant they must have still been working there. Could it have been a long-serving court lady, or maybe a eunuch who had been around since the previous emperor's time?

Jusetsu pressed her temples. What was going on? At any rate, she needed to tell Koshun what she'd found out. She ran her finger across the jade. If they could get revenge for Han Ojo, would it satisfy her enough to save her soul? On the other hand, if they left her injustice unavenged, not even a repose of the soul ritual would do the trick.

Jusetsu picked up the earring and dangled it in front of her eyes.

Jusetsu used the ingredients Onkei fetched for her to boil up a concoction and gave it to Kogyo to drink. The next day, the woman's temperature had gone down. When she fed her gruel containing ginseng and licorice to strengthen her body, her sickly complexion improved considerably. They spent the whole day taking care of the ailing

woman, and before they knew it, the sun had already set. Before long, Koshun turned up at the palace, as Jusetsu had sent a message to request his presence.

“Do you know the name of the of the eunuch who took away your tongue and killed Han Ojo?”

When they explained to Koshun the series of events, Koshun didn’t look particularly surprised. He simply asked Kogyo this question. Kogyo nodded and then wrote his name on a piece of paper. Koshun glanced at it before giving the paper to Eisei.

“That man isn’t anybody important, but he is the empress dowager’s lapdog,” he remarked. “He works in the palace registry now.”

“I’m glad we chose not to dispose of him back then,” he added in a murmur so quiet that only those next to him, Eisei and Jusetsu, could hear it. “Do you know the name of Han Ojo’s fiancé?” Koshun also asked.

“*Niangniang always called him Juro,*” Kogyo immediately wrote. Then she looked as if she was pausing for thought for a moment.

The name “Juro” referred to a person’s seniority within their family. It was always used to refer to the tenth man born in a particular generation.

Something seemed to come to mind a brief time later, and she hurriedly scribbled down a few more letters. “*Kakuko,*” she wrote.

That was his name.

“Kakuko...” Koshun whispered curiously.

“Do you know him?” Eisei asked.

Koshun put his hand to his chin, trying to remember. “I feel like I’ve heard that name before. I’m sure it was Meiin who mentioned it.”

Meiin was the scholar who acted as the emperor’s adviser.

“He excelled in the imperial exam, passing with the highest grade. He’s now working in the imperial library as a bookkeeper.”

He has a good memory, Jusetsu observed.

Koshun crossed his arms and became lost in thought. “If her family were reputable enough to get their daughter a position as an inner palace concubine, her fiancé must have come from a suitably good background. It’s no surprise that he would be an official. Still...”

How did Han Ojo's fiancé feel about what had happened to her? She was snatched away from her fiancé by the inner palace—or, that is to say, the emperor—and subsequently died there.

Jusetsu pressed her hand against her belt. She had stowed the earring away somewhere underneath it again.

“Could I...meet him?” Jusetsu asked Koshun, looking up at him.

“Could *you* meet him?” he asked back.

As a rule, the consorts in the inner palace were not permitted to meet with people from the outside unless they were related.

“It sounds like Han Ojo remembered her fiancé fondly, even after coming to the inner palace. I want to ask him what kind of relationship they had.”

If Han Ojo loved him that deeply, perhaps it was *him* that kept her anchored to this world. If he were in their hometown, it would be harder to meet with him as Jusetsu would not be able to leave the imperial estate, but since he was a palace official, it had to be possible. Koshun just needed to help facilitate it.

Koshun appeared to give it some thought, but soon replied, “Okay. Let's arrange for you to meet.”

Jusetsu gazed at Koshun's face for a moment. Despite it being his request in the first place, the emperor had gone far out of his way to visit a single court lady to listen to her story, and he was now readily complying with Jusetsu's wishes. *Why in the world is that jade earring so important to him?* Jusetsu wondered to herself.

“I posed this question to you since the offset, but...why are you putting so much effort into this? As insensitive as this may sound, it is nothing more than an earring you found on the ground.”

This was not normal behavior for an emperor.

Koshun glanced at Jusetsu and rose from his seat without saying a word. Annoyed that he ignored her question, Jusetsu followed him as he left the room.

Once they were out of the palace, Koshun stopped in his tracks. He didn't even bother to turn around and face her as he spoke. “I think I made it clear when I first came to see you,” he began quietly.

Jusetsu stood beside him, looking up at his face.

"I just want to know who dropped that earring."

"I told you that I couldn't..."

"I thought that if we found out who was haunting it, I'd be able to do some investigating."

"...So you made me do the investigating instead?"

"Thanks to you, we found out that the earring belonged to Han Ojo. I appreciate that."

"But that doesn't help us find out who dropped it now."

The person who lost the earring had to be the person who Han Ojo gifted it to. They were either a eunuch or court lady from the previous emperor's era, but there were too many of those to count.

"You still haven't told me why you want to know that in the first place," Jusetsu argued.

Koshun may have seemed like he was giving a proper answer, but he was evading the real question. He had been doing that since the very start. As earnest as he seemed, the emperor wasn't a trustworthy man.

Koshun looked down at Jusetsu from the corner of his eye, then bent over slightly. His face got closer to hers and she almost backed away, but what happened next made her stay still.

In an even quieter voice, he said, "I think it would just cause further trouble for you if you asked me that." He must not have wanted anyone to hear the truth.

"You've already caused me more than enough trouble—I doubt any more would make any difference."

"It wasn't *me* that picked up that earring."

Jusetsu gazed up at the emperor. "Then who did?"

"My spy in the inner palace."

"Spy..." Jusetsu echoed.

"The person who dropped it may have witnessed a certain plot being carried out. And if so, they could be of great help to me."

"Master," Eisei called out, "You don't need to go into too much detail."

Koshun cast a brief glance toward him to make him be quiet.

A plot? So the person who dropped the earring was a witness.

Jusetsu scowled. “I see. That is why you were putting so much effort into this. Not for the ghost.”

It was all a lie—even what he said about feeling sorry for her.

The look on Koshun’s face remained unchanged. He simply said, “I’m just answering your question.” And with that, he began to walk away.

Jusetsu stayed in her place and gave him a fierce glare as he went off into the distance—but then, a memory of something Koshun said came flowing back to her.

“Won’t you save her for me?”

She released the tension from her furrowed brow.

If he only wanted to track down the person who dropped it, there would have been no need for him to make that demand. But when Jusetsu came to this realization, she was confused. What was that all about? She was certain that Koshun was still not telling her the truth.

Jusetsu was silently watching Koshun disappear out of sight, but she suddenly stepped forward.

“Wait!” she called out to the emperor, who was heading toward the passageway.

When he turned around, she added, “I still have something I want to say to you,” and drew closer still.

“If it’s something to do with the earring, then I’m not...”

“It’s not!” Jusetsu interrupted him.

There was one thing she needed to ask. She couldn’t just leave it be.

Koshun stared at Jusetsu for a moment, then gave Eisei a signal. Eisei gave him a hesitant look, but bowed and went away regardless. Koshun turned to walk toward the pond. There was no breeze that night, and the moon’s reflection floated on the black surface of the water.

“...Why did you turn a blind eye to what you saw? I don’t understand your intentions,” Jusetsu asked, looking up at Koshun at the side of the pond.

She couldn't even begin to comprehend why he would pretend not to know her true identity. *What could possibly be going through his mind?* That thought constantly raced around her head.

Koshun looked down at her, then began to speak. "I wouldn't gain anything from exposing the truth." His voice was quiet, emotionless, and as subdued as a beam of sunlight in the winter. You couldn't infer any emotion from it, and his facial expression was just the same.

"On the contrary, it would cause more problems than good. If I were to execute you, I would no longer have a Raven Consort, and my people would condemn me for being so cruel. My grandfather took things too far," he said, staring at the water's surface. "As soon as he became emperor, he turned into a terrifying person. The older he got, the more paranoid he became, and he convinced himself that everyone around him was trying to steal his throne from him. It even drove him to kill his own sons."

The Flame Emperor had indeed had his two sons executed for treason.

"There's no need for me to have you killed. If you wanted to kill me, though, that'd be a different story." Koshun looked at Jusetsu.

"...I have no desire to do so," she replied.

Koshun examined her expression, trying to work out if she was lying. "Do you not hate me? Or my grandfather? Or my father?"

Jusetsu avoided meeting his gaze. Moonlight shone on the water, its cold surface glistening. "I don't know. I've never experienced hatred toward another person. If I were to hate anyone, it would be myself."

Koshun raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because I left my mother to die. When my mother was caught, I was sitting down on the ground, trying to hold my breath...so they wouldn't find me."

So that I, alone, would be spared.

"I left my mother to die," she whispered, looking at the reflection of the moon on the water.

This feeling had been tormenting and tearing up Jusetsu's heart for all this time. All she did that day was cover her ears and tremble. She stupidly thought that if she just waited for the situation to pass, everything would go back to the way it once was. It was so foolish of

her.

When she saw her mother's head, her heart shattered with regret. Why had she sat by and let that happen? Why couldn't she have worked up the courage to dash out and do something?

Her sorrow chipped away at the recesses of her heart, and there was nothing that could seal the wounds that it had made.

"If you wouldn't kill me because it wouldn't benefit you...that must mean that you might in the future, if it ever did," Jusetsu said casually, turning on her heel. Despite saying it, this didn't particularly bother her.

"Jusetsu."

That was the first time the emperor had called her by her name. The sound of it was strangely soft and quiet as it beat against Jusetsu's chest.

When she turned around, he had taken something off his belt and was holding it out for her.

"What's that?" she asked with a frown, not understanding what he was trying to do.

Koshun took one of Jusetsu's hands and placed the decoration into it. It was a small, fish-shaped ornament made of amber. "I am giving you this as a symbol of my promise. Take it."

"What promise?"

"My promise that I will not kill you."

Jusetsu looked at Koshun and the amber fish in turn. His eyes were the darkest shade of black and were as clear as running spring water.

For some reason, she didn't feel like she could look right into them for any longer. She averted her gaze.

"You can keep it," she said. "I wouldn't like anyone to think I stole it from you."

Jusetsu stuck out the hand that the amber fish was resting on. Koshun wouldn't take it and just turned away.

"W-wait!"

He glanced back at Jusetsu, who was trying to chase after him.

“Jusetsu, the same thing happened to me,” he said.

“Pardon?”

“I left my mother to die too.”

His words were void of emotion, and his deep, black eyes almost seemed to absorb the darkness that surrounded him. They looked empty. *This man’s heart is missing something too, and nothing will fill the gaps*, Jusetsu sensed.

The moonlight shone down on him as he walked and disappeared into the distance. Even the amber fish that sat in Jusetsu’s palm was gently illuminated by its pure, white light.

Koshun was ten when his mother died.

His mother was often plagued by melancholy in those days, but Koshun still paid her regular visits. These bouts of depression were caused by the harassment she received from the empress dowager—who at that time was still the empress.

Even when Koshun was named as the crown prince, his mother remained a consort. The support she received was weak, and that was the very reason her son ended up becoming the crown prince. The empress’s own heir had died in infancy, so Koshun, who had no powerful family members on his mother’s side to butt in, was the perfect candidate.

The emperor was timid and hated fighting, so he avoided rocking the boat at all costs. He feared the empress and her relatives so much that he did nothing to protect the crown prince’s mother and left her to fend for herself. He simply thought that if he stayed out of it, the empress would eventually get bored. He was the type of man who had no grasp whatsoever of the suffering of others.

The empress, on the other hand, was more than familiar with suffering—and to everyone else’s detriment. She knew exactly how to cause others pain.

Koshun’s mother despised fighting just as much as the emperor did, and perhaps that was why they hit it off. Nobody would ever know.

She tried as hard as she could not to hurt any of those around her. Even when her own father—a low-ranking official—was ridiculed in front of everyone, or she herself was forced to dance—something she despised—and was made into a laughingstock, she endured it. Never putting up a fight, she put up with whatever they threw her way. From Koshun's perspective, she looked pathetic—but he was a child then. He didn't have a clue.

"Stop coming here so often," she told him. "I'm sure you have a lot to do over in your palace."

These words made Koshun feel like she was deserting him. Why was he being treated like a nuisance when he was so worried about his mother's wellbeing?

He had learned a lot, but on the inside, he was still immature.

"Fine," Koshun said as he furiously rose from his seat. "You won't be seeing me again."

He then headed back to his palace to the east—the one that the crown prince called home.

Why did I say such a thing?

That had been the last time he saw his mother alive.

After his mother's funeral, Koshun paid his mother's empty palace a visit one more time. His mother was obviously nowhere to be seen—not in her room, not in her bed. Koshun sat aimlessly in a chair and stared at the garden that was visible through the doorway.

"Your mother didn't rebel against the empress because she was afraid that harm would come to you, young one," Grand Master Un told him. Apparently, that was why she discouraged him from visiting so frequently too.

Hearing this made Koshun want to visit her again—but before he had another chance to, she passed away.

Whenever he thought back on his final words to her, he felt the sharp pain like a blade piercing his chest and him falling down. This phantom blade left a gaping hole where it had once been. He was empty on the inside.

Before the peonies in the garden, Koshun cried.

Whenever he thought about his mother dying alone, unable to ask

the emperor for help, and with her own son, of all people, spewing harsh words toward her, he didn't know how to make up for it. There was nothing he *could* do—she was dead now.

At that moment, a shadow appeared from somewhere behind him.

“Who are you? What’s wrong? Are you crying?” asked a small voice.

Koshun could still clearly remember the girl who approached him.

“Master?”

Having just awoken from his slumber, Koshun looked over at Eisei. He placed a hand on his forehead and rose from his lounge chair. Eisei brewed a fragrant pot of tea for him, and the first sip made Koshun’s mind feel that much clearer.

With his official business for the morning done, he had laid down in his room in the inner court. His workload had increased lately and so he was often awake until late at night. His body was suffering because of it.

However, things were reaching a pivotal point.

There was no way he was going to mess things up now. He watched the rising steam and engaged in silent contemplation. To avoid disturbing his master, Eisei focused on quietly serving bowls of jujube dates simmered in honey. He added some lychees as well and passed a bowl to Koshun. The emperor brought one to his mouth as his thoughts wandered. The lychees were fresh and tantalizingly sweet. He could feel his exhaustion lifting away.

“Master, there’s a message for you from the Yamei Palace.”

Eisei took the note that a helper eunuch had brought and passed it to Koshun. When he opened it, he found a piece of water-patterned paper with elegant writing scrawled across it. It must have been Jusetsu’s handwriting.

Once the emperor read through it, a faint smile appeared on this face.

“What is it?” Eisei asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Koshun closed the letter and put it in his breast pocket. Then he gestured Eisei over to his side. “Has Kakuko been called

to the Koto Institute?”

“Yes,” Eisei replied.

The Koto Institute was where the palace’s best scholars were sent to compile and collate books. As the most impressive candidate in the imperial exam, Kakuko had been summoned to interpret a certain classical manuscript—but this was only a guise.

“Fetch two eunuch uniforms and send them to the Yamei Palace.”

In the letter, Jusetsu had demanded to see Kakuko as soon as possible. In fact, it was quite an arrogant-sounding letter.

“Fine...” Eisei agreed reluctantly.

There was no way they could take Jusetsu to the Koto Institute in her Raven Consort garb as it was located outside the inner palace. As surprising as it was, consorts were able to go out as long as they had permission, but it would be a hassle and would attract too much attention if she were to leave just to speak to a mere palace official.

Wearing men’s clothes was quite fashionable these days, and even some of those in the inner palace wore robes that were made for men. Despite this, if Jusetsu simply dressed in masculine clothing, she would still look like a woman. However, the emperor felt there was a small chance that she could get away with disguising herself as a boy eunuch.

“Whenever that consort’s involved,” Eisei mumbled softly, “you don’t act like yourself, master.”

Koshun hated breaking the rules—but now, he was overlooking the fact that Jusetsu was a surviving member of the last dynasty and was taking her out of the inner palace, dressed as a eunuch.

“Sometimes, these things are necessary,” Koshun replied.

Eisei seemed far from convinced. Despite being the one to say it, Koshun didn’t really understand either. He just wanted to see what that girl was going to do. He hadn’t felt this way for a long time—not since losing his mother and his friend.

Koshun got up and took a small case out of a cabinet. He lifted the lid and tucked its contents into his breast pocket.

Reluctantly, Eisei sent for a maid and instructed her to fetch some eunuch uniforms.

“They’re all men!” said Jusetsu.

She was looking around the place, overcome by curiosity.

Eisei looked at her. His eyes seemingly said, *well, obviously*.

Koshun said nothing.

They were walking the corridors of the Koto Institute. Scholars were coming and going. Their host was a scholar known as Meiin, whose real name was Kajun. The man looked intelligent and was at least in his forties. Upon seeing Jusetsu and Jiujiu dressed as eunuchs, he simply glanced toward Koshun, his face remaining unchanged.

“This way,” Meiin said, guiding the group toward one particular room.

Their destination was the book storage room. The shelves by the wall were crammed full of bamboo slips and scrolls, and the stench of old ink filled the air. In the center of the room, even more scrolls and paper were piled up on a table, and in the corner, a young man was sitting down. When he noticed Koshun, he sprung from his seat, flustered, and knelt before him.

“Are you Kakuko?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Koshun sat down in a chair. Jusetsu, meanwhile, had stood there in shock from the moment she saw Kakuko’s face.

“You’re...” Jusetsu started, astonished.

Koshun turned around, and Kakuko joined him in looking over at her as well. For a moment, he looked puzzled, but he then let out a yelp of recognition. His face turned blue with such intensity that you could almost hear the blood rushing from it.

It only took one look at him for her to know for certain. She could tell by his droopy eyes and friendly countenance. He might have been wearing an official’s uniform now, but he was *definitely* the eunuch that helped Jusetsu when she was attacked the other day.

“How could this be? Are you not that eunuch? How come you are here?”

“Well, you see...” Sweat began pouring down Kakuko’s face and his lips quivered as he spoke. Then he forced his eyes shut and prostrated himself on the floor. “Please accept my sincerest, deepest apologies!”

“What’s happening?” Koshun asked, requesting an explanation from Jusetsu—but she knew no better than he did.

“He was the person who helped me when those eunuchs attacked me,” she told him.

“Oh,” he remarked, raising his eyebrows. “That means he snuck into the inner palace, then.”

“Is that so?” Jusetsu said, looking at the pale-faced young man.

Judging by his lack of excuses, it seemed like the emperor was right.

“Why would you *do* such a foolish thing?” Meiin reprimanded him. “Who knows what would have happened if you were caught!”

“That means...he risked being exposed to spare me.” Jusetsu walked up to Kakuko, who was crouched down on the floor, and kneeled down herself. “What was your reason for sneaking into the inner palace?” she asked.

Kakuko hung his head. He seemed unsure whether or not to tell her the truth.

“Did it have to do with Han Ojo?”

Kakuko looked up in surprise. “How do you...”

“We heard you were her fiancé,” said Koshun.

“Y-you are aware of all that?”

“Han Ojo’s lady-in-waiting told us.”

“Her lady-in-waiting...” The frightened look disappeared from Kakuko’s face. He sidled up to Koshun. “Where is she?!”

Eisei promptly stepped in between the two men, preventing Kakuko from getting too close. Kakuko carried on talking.

“I want to speak to her. I’m sure her lady-in-waiting would know that Shosui would never have poisoned...”

Kakuko got so excited that Eisei had to push him away. Jusetsu lent him a hand to pull him back up off the floor.

“...Was ‘Shosui’ Han Ojo’s given name?” Koshun asked quietly.

His calm voice helped Kakuko regain his composure somewhat too. “Yes, it was.”

“Did you want to speak to her lady-in-waiting about the poisoning of the then-Magpie Consort?”

“Yes. There’s no way Shosui could have done such a thing—or hang herself either...” Kakuko said. His voice choked up with tears and he cast his gaze downward.

“Did you sneak into the inner palace to look for her?”

“I did... I wanted to find out the real reason Shosui died.” Then he clenched a fist on his knee.

“When I heard that Shosui was dead, nobody told me that she hung herself, or that she allegedly poisoned another consort. Her father simply said that she passed away from an illness. I knew she wasn’t weak physically, but it’s not unheard of for people to die from diseases that are going around. At that time, I simply mourned her, like you’d expect.”

He only learned about the details of her death after becoming a palace official.

“I heard a lot of rumors about the previous emperor—things about consorts, and the empress dowager too. When Shosui’s name story came up in conversation, I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.”

Kakuko chewed down on his lip. “Shosui would be the last person ever to poison anyone. She wouldn’t kill herself because she was suspected of doing so either.”

“...That still doesn’t mean you had any right to sneak into the inner palace,” Koshun said, and Kakuko drooped his head again.

“You could never understand, Your Majesty. You’ll never know what it’s like to have your fiancé snatched away by the emperor.”

“How rude,” Eisei commented.

The way Kakuko was talking made Eisei look daggers at him. Koshun raised a hand to hold him back.

“We were engaged since to each other since we were young. Neither of us ever thought for a minute that we wouldn’t be able to get married. Then, I suddenly found out that I wouldn’t even be allowed to

see her anymore because she was going to the inner palace. The night before she headed to the capital, Shosui came to see me in secret, without her parents knowing. She took off one of her earrings and told me to take it as a keepsake. It was a jade earring that was passed down from her mother.”

He grimaced. He looked like he was about to cry. “I lost that as well, in the inner palace...” he said quietly.

Jusetsu gawked at him. “Excuse me?”

He lost that in the inner palace? It can't be.

Jusetsu took out the earring that she was keeping in her belt.

Kakuko's eyes opened so wide that they looked like they were about to pop out of his head. “Th-that's it! The metal clasp was damaged... Yes, it is! That's Shosui's earring!” He took the earring in his trembling hand, blushing with excitement.

So, this was the earring that her fiancé had, Jusetsu thought. This came as a surprise—she'd been certain that it was the one that Han Ojo gave to someone in the inner palace. After all, that's where it was found. It didn't occur to her that her fiancé could have snuck in and dropped one.

“Were you the one who found it?”

“No. It was this guy,” Jusetsu said, looking toward Koshun—although she knew it had actually been his spy.

That was when Jusetsu remembered that Koshun was looking for the person who dropped it—because they were a witness. This meant that witness was Kakuko, but so far, Koshun hadn't shown any sign of mentioning anything. It wasn't Jusetsu's place to bring it up, so she kept quiet.

Kakuko was taken aback by the way Jusetsu referred to the emperor so casually, but nobody was reprimanding her for it. He seemed to understand what was going on.

“A ghost is haunting the earring that you're holding. That guy wants to save her, so he ended up forcing me to assist him.”

“The emperor wants to?” Kakuko looked at Koshun, then back at Jusetsu. “Wait, did you say ‘ghost?’ You don't mean the ghost of Shosui...do you?”

“Indeed.”

Kakuko gave her a pained look, then stared at the earring. “Is she still suffering, even after her death...?” he whispered, leaning toward Jutsu. “If you were ‘forced’ to save her spirit, then I suppose you must be the...Raven Consort, mustn’t you? I’ve heard you possess some magical abilities...”

“Oh, indeed I do,” Jutsu said haughtily.

“Does that mean you could save Shosui?”

This question left Jutsu stumped. “I’m...not sure,” she answered truthfully.

Kakuko was visibly dejected.

“If we eliminate her regrets, she should continue on to paradise without our help. If she became a ghost because she wants vengeance for her murder, then there may be a way we can help alleviate that resentment.” Jutsu turned to Koshun for confirmation. “There is, isn’t there?”

Koshun nodded. “We’re preparing to arrest the eunuch who had her killed.”

Something in between a soft shriek and a sigh escaped Kakuko’s lips.

“So that means Shosui was definitely innocent? A-and...that she was *murdered*? Just like that?” He plummeted to the floor as if all his strength had left his body. His face contorted in frustration. “But why? Why did Shosui have to meet such a fate?”

“They were targeting the Magpie Consort. Han Ojo was the most convenient person for them to frame as the culprit because she lived in the same palace. That was the only reason.”

Kakuko covered his face with his hands. He took in large breaths in an effort to hold back the unbounded indignation that was welling up inside him. At last, he looked up, stood up straight, and turned toward Jutsu again. “I’m begging you, Raven Consort.”

“What is it?”

“Please, won’t you let me see her ghost?” He grasped tightly onto her sleeve, just as a child clinging to his mother. “I’m begging you,” he implored her, a tormented look in his eyes.

Jusetsu wasn't sure what to do.

The ghost was a far cry from the beautiful Shosui that Kakuko once knew. Having been strangled to death, she was in a pitiful state. Jusetsu was hesitant to allow Kakuko to see her like that.

"That ghost doesn't look like the Shosui you knew. Her unavenged resentment and regrets have coalesced in the form of a ghost..."

"It doesn't bother me what she looks like. As long as I can get one look at her, that'd be enough for me." Kakuko became increasingly vehement. Invading the inner palace was a crime punishable by death. He must have known that, and that was why his pleading sounded so desperate. "Just one last look," he said.

Jusetsu felt a pang of bitterness spreading throughout her chest. "...Understood," she replied, quickly reaching out her hand in front of her.

The palm of her hand became hot, and a petal appeared on top of it—then another one, and then another one. Finally, they all came together to form a single peony.

The peony glowed faintly before slowly turning into a pale flame. Jusetsu took Kakuko's hand and picked up the jade earring he was holding between her fingers. Once she did this, Jusetsu blew on the flickering, pale-red flame.

The flame swelled like smoke and surrounded the jade earring. The figure of a person appeared in front of it. It was the figure of a woman in a red ruqun—Shosui. She looked the same as when they saw her in the Yamei Palace—her face was swollen and purple, and a silk shawl was digging into her neck.

The overwhelming sight of this made Kakuko gulp with surprise, but he still didn't look away. "Shosui... Shosui." He reached out his hand for the ghost, but he couldn't touch it. Shosui didn't turn to him and instead simply stared into space. She couldn't hear him.

Kakuko looked down, despondent, and kept murmuring her name.

She used to think longingly of him whenever she touched her earrings, and yet her ghost had no feelings for him left. It was either that, or this earring had been the one she gave to Kakuko—and the one she wore to remember him by was somewhere else.

Even so, she didn't have the time to spare to go looking for the

one Shosui gave to someone in the inner palace. *Could Kakuko get his voice to reach her somehow?* Jusetsu felt frustrated as she mulled over this, but then Koshun called out to her. “Jusetsu,” he said.

Whenever that man called her by her name, it made her feel strange. Koshun’s voice was soft and gentle. Despite not showing any emotion through his face, his voice had a subtle, warm tenderness to it, reminiscent of faint sunlight. It shook her heart to its very foundations.

She tried to hold back the sensation in her chest, which felt as unsettling as goosebumps. She looked over at him. “...What is it?”

“Take this,” he said, pulling something out of his breast pocket.

Jusetsu reached out for it automatically, but when she saw what he’d placed in her palm, her eyes opened wide with surprise. “I don’t understand...” The item that Koshun gave her was a jade earring—an earring with a large drop-shaped jade dangling from it. “Is this earring...?”

It looked quite similar to the other jade earring. No, it was totally identical. Jusetsu held up the two earrings in front of her and compared them to each other. They were certainly a pair—two golden earrings with jade dangling from them.

“Why did you have it?” Jusetsu asked, bemused. Shosui gave one of the earrings to Kakuko, and the other to somebody in the inner palace.

Somebody.

“Are you telling me...”

“It happened when I was ten. I met her in a garden in the inner palace after my mother’s funeral,” Koshun said slowly and quietly. “I didn’t know who she was, but she was only wearing one earring. I found that odd, and when I asked her why, she said she gave the other one away to somebody special. I don’t know how she managed to speak so candidly about it, but it was probably to distract me from the fact that I was crying.”

He admitted that he was crying in a matter-of-fact way. It reminded Jusetsu of something he said before.

“I left my mother to die too.”

She wondered how he would have been feeling as the tears streamed down his face.

“...I did something terrible to her,” he went on. “I asked her to give me her earring. I was jealous that the person she cared so much for was still alive, even though she couldn’t see him. I couldn’t bear it.” Koshun’s voice was as soft as water soaking into a rock. The emotions that Koshun was experiencing at the time seeped into Jusetsu’s heart in small waves.

“And so she gave me this earring. She smiled as she did it. She didn’t give it to me because I was the heir—she gave it to me because I was a crying child, and she wanted to comfort me...” Koshun paused for a moment. He blinked, his eyes welling up with tears. He let out a faint sigh, then spoke again.

“I always regretted taking that earring from her, but I lost the opportunity to give it back.” Koshun stared at the jade. “I always hoped I’d be able to return it at some point.”

So that was why he was so concerned with who had dropped it. His feelings finally made sense to Jusetsu.

“*Won’t you save her for me?*” Koshun once asked her—and as it turned out, his plea was genuine.

Jusetsu offered the pair of earrings to Kakuko. He looked intently at them, then carefully took them from her. He clasped his hand around them and pressed them against his chest, as if he were embracing them.

“Shosui...”

Suddenly, Kakuko looked up with a start. The ghost in front of him had changed. Her purple, swollen face was now slender, pale, and beautiful. The silk shawl that had been strangling her disappeared, and her disheveled clothes had made way for a brightly colored ruqun, as green as fresh grass. The edges of her mouth curved upward in a graceful smile.

Kakuko stood up. He extended his hand to touch her cheek, but naturally, this was impossible. Even so, the way Shosui narrowed her eyes and smiled almost made it look like she’d felt his touch. She held out a long, delicate, pale finger, traced it down his cheek, and touched his lips. Then she brought that finger onto her own lips. It was a kiss.

Tears fell from Shosui’s eyes, but she was still smiling. Her smile showed that she couldn’t have been happier.

And that was all it took.

The vision of Shosui began wavering like smoke. It became less distinct, dissipated, and began to fade away like a trail of tobacco smoke. Kakuko reached out and the smoke lingered reluctantly on his fingers for a moment, as if it didn't want to leave. Then it vanished into thin air.

They may have only been reunited for mere seconds, but for Shosui, it was enough to save her soul. The scene made Jusetsu's chest ache with heart-wrenching pain.

Kakuko broke down on the floor, holding the earrings to his chest as he sobbed. His wailing was the only thing that could be heard in the otherwise silent room.

"Thank you very much," Kakuko said to Jusetsu once his whimpering subsided, and he wiped his face dry.

Then he turned to Koshun and bowed. "You freed her from her regrets. I am willing to atone for breaking into the inner palace with my own death. But before that, there is something I would appreciate the honor of speaking to you about, Your Majesty."

Something he wanted to say to Koshun?

Jusetsu looked in Koshun's direction, but the emperor simply urged Kakuko to continue with a brief utterance. "Go on."

Koshun looked up with a reverent look on his face.

"Whenever I snuck into the inner palace, I pretended to be a member of the duck army and went inside with the men who clean out the mud from the inner palace gutters."

The duck army was the name given to the low-ranking eunuchs who handled physical labor. There were many such eunuchs, and the members of this group frequently changed. Even as they entered or left the inner palace, the gatekeepers didn't bother identifying them individually. Kakuko explained that this made it was easy to weasel one's way into the crowd. Details on how he snuck into the palace would be necessary to ensure the inner palace's security in the future.

However, what he revealed next came as a shock to Jusetsu.

"The court ladies love to gossip. I used to lurk behind the bushes and listen carefully as they chatted. I wanted to know what happened to Shosui, you see. As I was doing that, I happened to overhear what a

certain eunuch and a court lady were saying. It was nighttime, and they were under a tree with nobody else about. Their wording wasn't clear at first, so it didn't really sink in, but it sounded like they were secretly planning to poison you, Your Majesty."

"Poison?!"

The atmosphere became tense. Jusetsu looked at Koshun, but he was still perfectly composed, his face not showing a speck of emotion. Perhaps his spy had notified him of this, and he already knew.

"...Whereabouts did you hear that?" Koshun inquired softly.

"In the garden of the Kinko Palace."

The Kinko Palace—that was where the archives were.

"The eunuch and the court lady were under an osmanthus, and I was in a bush nearby."

Koshun nodded at this response and said, "There's a court lady who once worked as the empress dowager's lady-in-waiting and is now employed as a cataloger in the archives at that very palace. That eunuch used to work for the empress dowager as well. He's been demoted to the eunuch institute now. Most of the eunuchs and court ladies who were the empress dowager's lackeys were punished, but not all of them have been hunted down."

Koshun continued to speak unabated.

"That's why I got my spies to snoop on any eunuch or court lady who was once associated with the empress. I too was aware that there were suspicious developments involving those people. However, my spies have been unable to get hold of any conclusive proof. Then, one night, they spotted a eunuch and a court lady talking in secret."

The emperor glanced at Kakuko.

"My spies were unable to hear the conversation from where they were. Once those two finished talking, they left, but after that, my spies saw somebody hurriedly dashing away from a nearby bush. He looked like a eunuch, but they couldn't tell for certain. The spies chased after him, but they lost sight of him in the darkness of the night. He did, however, leave something behind, perhaps dropped as he rushed away because he was in such a panic. It was a jade earring."

In other words, that was the earring that Koshun brought to Jusetsu.

Kakuko's mouth was gaping open with disbelief. "So... So you already knew about the poisoning plot?"

"No," said Koshun. "As I said, my spies couldn't get any definitive information or proof. That's why you were an important witness. What you told me was extremely important. Please accept my sincere gratitude."

Kakuko gazed down at the floor, looking conflicted.

"You shouldn't be *thanking* him, master," Eisei interjected in a cold voice. "If this man had reported to you right away, you wouldn't have had to jump through all these hoops to search for the person who dropped the earring. The only reason he's kept it to himself for all this time is because it would've given away the fact he snuck into the inner palace. He was more interested in keeping himself safe than you."

Eisei's last line was especially harsh. Kakuko looked down at his feet.

"When I heard what they were saying...it didn't immediately occur to me that I needed to tell you. To be honest, I don't feel very positively about the Imperial family. After all, that was who stole my fiancé from me."

Kakuko had no more lingering regrets, which may have been why he made no effort to hide how he truly felt. Eisei and the others raised their eyebrows.

"But you did your best to save Shosui. It was because you took such good care of her earring for all these years that we were able to save her. In order to repay you for that, I told you everything I heard. But...was all that effort just to find me, Your Majesty? Was it all so you could hear my testimony?"

Kakuko had a desperate look in his eyes. Koshun didn't answer.

It can't have been, thought Jusetsu. The fact remained that Koshun held onto Shosui's earring for all that time and asked Jusetsu to save her for him. His wish to save her must have been unrelated to his objective of tracking down Kakuko. It was his own, personal wish.

If he just wanted to find a witness, he could have kept quiet about the spy business. And if he did that, Kakuko would have had nothing but gratitude for the emperor. Koshun wasn't stupid enough not to realize that. Was he revealing all simply because it was the fair thing to

do?

This man isn't the shrewdest fellow around, Jusetsu thought.

She finally had some grasp of what was going on. Koshun was unable to express his emotions and had no way of communicating how he really felt. This could have been due to this mother's death, or perhaps due to the period of time he had his heirship taken away from him—she just didn't know.

Jusetsu started to speak. "...If his only wish were to find you, there are several more efficient ways in which he could have done so. Requesting my help was an excessively roundabout way to do it. And yet I had to be the one to help, because *he* asked me to save her."

That was the most important answer of all.

Kakuko stared at Jusetsu, then down at the earring in his hand. If he thought it through calmly, even he should have been able to understand what Jusetsu was saying.

"...Yes," Kakuko said a few moments later with a nod. "You're absolutely right, Raven Consort. Thanks to the emperor, I was able to see Shosui again. My sincere apologies for being so discourteous."

Then he lowered his head and bowed to Koshun once again. "Thank you for everything you did for her."

"I was just returning a favor," Koshun said, before standing up. "You may go home—and don't say a word to anyone about our meeting."

"Huh?" Kakuko's eyes widened. "Go home?' Aren't you going to send me to the justice center?"

The justice center was the office that administered punishment to criminals.

"Men are sentenced to death if they infiltrate the inner palace without permission, but as long as they have the emperor's permission, they're welcome to enter. You infiltrated the inner palace on my orders to find out what that eunuch intended to do."

The emperor was saying that he was going to overlook the man's crime. There was no way he was going to let an important witness like Kakuko be killed.

"D-do you mean that?" Kakuko asked, looking up at the emperor.

“But I didn’t tell you what they said to plead for my life. I had no intention of asking you to spare me...”

Kakuko was getting angry. *What an emotional fool*, Jusetsu couldn’t help but think, as inappropriate as it was at the moment. She realized that, in part, she was just jealous—it was because he was such a passionate man that he’d been able to do so much for Shosui.

“I told you, didn’t I? I wanted to repay Han Ojo for what she did for me. You are a part of that,” Koshun snapped brusquely. “Not that it will bring Han Ojo back to life, but...”

As blunt as he was, this last line he whispered contained a deep sadness. Worried that even Kakuko may have picked up on it, he went quiet.

“It would be a shame to lose one of our most capable officials over something so trivial. Also, I’d like to find where they’re stashing away that poison.”

Koshun looked over at Eisei, but the attendant shook his head.

“According to the reports the spies have given us, no traces of poison could be found in the Kinko Palace or at the palace eunuch institute.”

It seemed like they’d already looked into this.

“There haven’t been any opportunities for them to obtain the poison in the first place.”

They knew that the spies were looking for them, and that being the case, they had no way of getting poison from the outside.

“But we can assume from their conversation about the plot that they *have* managed to get their hands on some. Before we confront them, I want to secure some evidence. We could force them to reveal the poison’s whereabouts *after* arresting them, but if there are any collaborators we don’t know about, they’ll get rid of it in the meantime. I can’t imagine they’d hide such an important assassination weapon somewhere totally out of sight, though,” Koshun said.

He looked stumped. There were only so many places they could hide the poison without his spies spotting it. There was no trace of them communicating with any other collaborators either. While Koshun and Eisei discussed this, Jusetsu mulled over some thoughts of her own.

Then, something grabbed her and sent alarm bells ringing in her

head.

The Kinko Palace... A court lady who worked as a palace cataloger... A eunuch.

Didn't I hear something about that a short time ago? Jusetsu thought to herself. *What was the context?*

"A court lady who worked as a palace cataloger... A eunuch..." she whispered under her breath as she traced those words back in her memory.

There had to be *something* that she was forgetting.

"Oh!" Jusetsu exclaimed in a surprisingly loud voice, making Koshun and the others look toward her.

"What is it?" Koshun asked.

Jusetsu didn't answer and turned to Jiujiu, who was standing behind her, instead. "Jiujiu," she said, "you got mixed up with that difficult palace cataloguer court lady, didn't you?"

"Huh? Oh, right, yes."

"Is she a newcomer like you?"

"Yes, she is."

"Oh..."

"What are you talking about?" Koshun inquired. He looked at Jiujiu, making her blush.

"No, it's just... There's a court lady I know who works as a palace cataloguer. She exchanges letters with this eunuch in the Hien Palace, and... Wait, she didn't want me to tell anyone that!"

Jiujiu quickly held her tongue. Court ladies belonged to the emperor, so any romantic developments between them and eunuchs were not to be spoken about publicly—even though people turned a blind eye to them in reality.

However, that court lady must have had *another* reason to forbid Jiujiu from revealing her secret.

"You said she told you it wasn't *her* exchanging the letters with the eunuch, but someone else, didn't you?" Jusetsu confirmed.

"Yes," Jiujiu responded. "Other people were asking her to deliver letters for them. They must have been her superiors if they were getting

her to do their errands, and there was probably some kind of trade-off involved.”

Superiors—that indicated veteran court ladies. Koshun gave a fierce stare.

“Jiujiu. That court lady was pushing those unreasonable demands on you as a cover.”

“A cover?” Jiujiu repeated, stunned.

“A cover for bringing over those letters.”

He felt there was something odd about the fact that the court lady would bother Jiujiu every single time she came by. The way a newcomer like her was able to abandon her post so frequently only added to his suspicions. If one of her superiors was letting her go, she could have covered it up in any way she wanted.

“What was the name of the eunuch from the Hien Palace that she was swapping letters with?” Koshun asked in a grave, low voice.

Jiujiu stiffened up at the sound of his intense tone. She then answered with a nervous look on her face. “H-his name is Choeki.”

“That eunuch didn’t work for the empress dowager,” Koshun said. “What about the cataloger lady who was taking over the letters?”

“She’s the fourteenth daughter of the Ri family. Her name is Shuyo. Her father is the assistant for the trade committee.”

“Did you get the name of the court lady who asked her to deliver the letters?”

“No...” said Jiujiu, shifting her eyes about restlessly as she tried her hardest to remember. “Umm, but...she did once tell me that there was another court lady who took good care of her... She said that she was going to get her to put a good word in for her to get a job as a lady-in-waiting one of these days. Her name was Shin.”

Eisei gave Koshun a shocked look. Koshun simply raised his eyebrows in surprise for a moment, but Jusetsu then saw this wave of emotion wash away again like the tide.

“Shin used to be the empress dowager’s lady-in-waiting,” Koshun said calmly. “She was the court lady who was talking to the one from the palace eunuch institute in secret. I don’t know whether Choeki is her lover or her friend, but she was using this newcomer as a front to

distract from the fact the two of them were communicating. Maybe it wasn't just *letters* she was giving him. Sei, the poison isn't in the Kinko Palace or at the palace eunuch institute—it's in the Hien Palace. Search Choeki's room."

"Y-yes, master," Eisei complied with a bow, then left the room.

Upon finding out that someone she knew was involved in a murder plot, Jiujiu went pale.

"Shuyo didn't necessarily know what she was cooperating with," said Jusetsu. "I can't imagine she would have that much courage. They used his advances toward her as bait."

"Yeah..." Jiujiu nodded listlessly.

Jusetsu looked over at Koshun. He was staring into space, seemingly contemplating something. She remembered the emotion that flashed across his face when he heard that the court lady was called Shin. It almost seemed like an expression of joy.

From the side, he looked as still as a tree as he fixed his gaze ahead. It was impossible to discern the emotion behind his eyes.

Lady Shin, the palace cataloger court lady, and Kogen, the eunuch from the palace eunuch institute, were arrested shortly thereafter.

A bundle of heartbreak grass, a type of poisonous plant, was discovered in Choeki's room in the Hien Palace. Choeki had no idea that it was poisonous, nor that it was to be used to kill the emperor. He said his sweetheart, Lady Shin, had asked him to keep it so it wouldn't be found, so he hid it away.

Lady Shin's parents ran a medicine shop, and she had been keeping the heartbreak grass in secret. This was the same plant that Koshun's mother, Consort Sha, had been killed with in the previous emperor's time. After the empress dowager was put into confinement, Lady Shin was given a leisurely job as a palace cataloger. Kogen approached her with a murder plot, and she got on board with it. However, as much as they wanted to move forward with the plan, the watchful eyes of Koshun's spies meant they had to keep up appearances. They took advantage of Ri Shuyo and made her keep it instead.

Kogen confessed that the empress dowager bribed him to plot to murder the emperor.

The eunuch that framed Han Ojo and killed her was captured at the same time. He too admitted that the empress dowager had bribed him.

After the aforementioned matters were solemnly examined at the autumn ministry—the center for justice—the empress dowager was sentenced to execution.

Jusetsu sensed someone's presence and looked up. The doors opened and Shinshin went flying at that exact moment. Eisei caught the magic bird that swooped down on him with ease, holding it by the scruff of its neck. Koshun walked in afterward. Jusetsu, still seated on her bed inside the fine silk curtains, watched them enter.

Koshun stepped up to the curtains and gave Eisei an order. "Let go of the bird."

Koshun then opened the curtains slightly. Jusetsu glared at him.

"Did I give you permission to come in?"

"If it bothers you, bolt the door."

"...What are you here for tonight? I didn't think you had any further need for me."

Unaffected by Jusetsu's cruel words, Koshun looked around the room. His gaze landed on an incense burner that was sitting on top of a cabinet. "When I first came here, I found the smell of incense in this room quite intense. Was that to cover up the smell of your hair dye?"

Jusetsu furrowed her brow. Was *that* what he'd come to ask? "Leave." Jusetsu touched one of the peonies in her hair.

"No, wait," Koshun said, stopping her in a relaxed way. "You've done so much for me that I felt I needed to bring you a reward."

"A reward? I don't need any money."

Koshun came inside the curtains without permission and stood in front of Jusetsu.

She recoiled slightly and backed away. "Wh-what is it?"

Koshun put his hand in his breast pocket and tossed a brocade drawstring bag toward her. It landed on Jusetsu's knee. *What strange behavior*, Jusetsu noted as she opened it up. Inside, she found some dried jujube dates. "A rather...measly 'reward,' don't you think?"

It was the kind of thing you'd give to a child for doing their chores.

"The idea occurred to me a little while ago and I happened to have some. I'll arrange an *official* reward for you another time, complete with a certificate."

"I don't want anything grandiose. This is enough for me," said Jusetsu, picking up a jujube date in her fingers and putting it in her mouth. The more she chewed on it, the more its unique sweetness spread inside her mouth.

Koshun seated himself on the bed.

"Why are you sitting down?" asked Jusetsu, shifting to the side slightly.

"...As of today, it's over," Koshun told her in a low whisper.

Jusetsu almost asked what he meant, but then it hit her. Today was the day of the empress dowager's execution.

Koshun's gaze wandered around the room. He seemed tired.

"I've been wanting to see her dead all this time," Koshun said, his words as quiet and steady as a splash of mud sliding off a wall. "That woman killed my mother and my friend—and she did it with ease, as if she was plucking the wings off a defenseless insect."

"Your friend...?" Jusetsu knew about what happened to his mother, but this was the first time hearing him mention a friend.

"And yet, I still decided not to kill her out of hatred. I decided to put her to trial in the right way—in accordance with the law—and then have her executed. I wouldn't do anything underhanded. After all, I'm not like her. That's why I was so overjoyed when I thought I was going to get my hands on some proof, thinking I would finally be able to put her to death."

He leaned back and laid on the mattress. Jusetsu wanted to say, "*Who do you think you are, lying down on somebody else's bed without permission?!*" but Koshun seemed so exceptionally exhausted that he ended up closing his eyes. Jusetsu had missed her chance to voice any objections.

"As it turns out, there's no *right* way to have someone killed," he murmured indistinctly before opening his eyes a little. "The only thing I'm left with is my regret that I wasn't able to save any of them. All this

time, I was able to use my desire to kill her to console myself...but I can't even do that anymore."

Koshun looked at Jusetsu. "You told me you didn't hate anyone, didn't you? How have you managed to hold yourself together?"

Jusetsu looked down at him, then averted her gaze. "I don't know. I did feel empty for a while. It was the previous Raven Consort who made me feel whole again."

"I see," Koshun let out a deep breath. "It must be that emptiness that I'm experiencing now."

His voice was hoarse. Jusetsu didn't say anything. She was painfully aware of why he had come to visit her that evening, but she just couldn't find the words to console him properly.

Koshun almost reached out toward her, wondering what she was thinking, but he stopped himself. Sluggishly, he got up and began to speak, loosening the collar of his shirt.

"About those eunuchs who attacked you..."

"What?"

What is he talking about now? Jusetsu wondered, but the memory of how she was attacked on the way to the cleansing quarters on an earlier occasion came to mind.

"It turns out the empress dowager was the one who put them up to it, just as I thought. She had gotten wind of the fact that you were doing something under my orders."

"How on earth did the empress dowager get hold of that much information? Your surveillance is..."

Too lax, she wanted to say, but stopped herself before she finished her sentence. It was *intentionally* lax. He had loosened the net so he could wait for people to get caught in the trap.

"Thanks to those tactics, we also managed to flush out the remainder of the empress dowager's supporters. I do apologize for letting you get caught in the crossfire, though. I am sorry."

His tone was so indifferent that it was hard to believe that he really felt bad at all. Jusetsu stayed quiet, and Koshun carried on speaking.

"Since you had a bodyguard, I assumed you'd be all right. That

was my mistake.”

It seemed like he was feeling remorseful, albeit in his own unique way. His facial expression was still entirely unreadable.

Then Koshun blinked slightly, and he stared right at Jusetu’s face.

“What?” she asked.

“...Would you be interested in becoming one of my *real* consorts?”

“What?!” Jusetu frowned. “That came out of nowhere! Are you sure you’re not still half asleep?”

“I’ve been so busy leading up to today that I haven’t been sleeping properly... But when I told you I wanted you to be one of my consorts, I wasn’t sleep talking.”

“You must be. I’m the Raven Consort, and...”

“There is no rule to say that the emperor *can’t* take the Raven Consort as one of his personal consorts.”

“That’s only because it’s already a given.”

There was no way that Koshun didn’t know that. He was talking utter nonsense, and that irritated Jusetu. She couldn’t become a proper consort, and she couldn’t go anywhere either. She couldn’t wish for anything. Yelling and complaining about the absurdity of her position to this man wasn’t going to change anything. Jusetu simply looked away.

“I refuse to play along with this nonsense. Hurry up and leave,” she said callously, but Koshun showed no intention of moving.

Maybe I should force him out instead, Jusetu thought to herself—but she froze, because right at that moment, Koshun reached out his hand and touched her hair.

“...When I saw you on the edge of the pond, you looked like how I imagined a goddess would look.” Koshun cast his eyes downward, perhaps attempting to remember what he saw back then. “Your silver hair was shining in the moonlight. I had never seen anything so beautiful in my life...”

His gentle whisper of a voice drifted from above her. Jusetu had no idea how to respond. Her eyes darted about uncomfortably, Koshun drew closer, and Jusetu became even more flustered. “Wha...?”

She tried to shout, “*What are you doing?*” but before she could do so, Koshun leaned over at an angle and fell straight onto the mattress.

“Huh...?”

When Jusetsu looked at him again, she found him snoring away with his eyes closed.

He was fast asleep.

“...Come on,” said Jusetsu, but Koshun didn’t open his eyes.

Rather than speech, all she could hear was him breathing peacefully. Jusetsu shook his shoulders in a panic.

“Come on, wake up, won’t you? This is *my* bed! You can’t sleep here.”

Koshun showed no signs of stirring—and, to make matters worse, he was holding on to her hair. She tried to pull it away, but he didn’t seem to want to let go. Instead, his strong grip tightened even more.

“Huh?! Eisei? Eisei! You must be there. This *fool* has fallen asleep on my bed! Take him home!”

She heard his voice coming from the other side of the curtain. “It would be an impudent act for me to wake master and take him home, so it would unfortunately be beyond my capabilities to do so. You wouldn’t understand. I would appreciate it if you could, at the very least, show him some respect by allowing him to sleep peacefully.”

“Wha...? If you’re not joking, then where am I supposed to sleep?”

“Perhaps you could consider kindly laying your head to rest on the floor?” he replied. He then seemingly disappeared from behind the curtain without waiting for an answer. Jusetsu had been noticing it for a while, but his attitude toward her was extremely hostile.

“You...”

Jusetsu scowled at the curtains, then looked bitterly down at Koshun. It may have been somebody else’s bed, but he made himself more than comfortable sleeping on it. He didn’t seem like he was going to let go of Jusetsu’s hair, either.

However, she had an easy way of kicking him out that would work, regardless of whether he was asleep or awake. Jusetsu touched a peony at the back of her head and removed it from her hair. All it would take was one single breath on the flower, and Koshun would be

out of the door.

Jusetsu gazed at the emperor's sleeping face. Why did he look so peaceful like this?

The peony in her palm turned into a pale red flame. Jusetsu gently wrapped her hands around it and held it over Koshun's head. When she moved her hands away, the flame turned into a number of faintly sparkling petals, and they slowly drifted toward him.

"Tonight, and only tonight..." Jusetsu whispered, "let me give you a good dream."

The petals disappeared as they landed on Koshun. Jusetsu never found out what kind of dream he had that night, nor what happened in it.

*The Flower
Whistle*

SOON AFTER the second jing—meaning it was between 9 and 11 p.m.—Jusetsu went down the passage at the back of her room and opened the silk twill curtains. On the other side of them, there was a small room with an altar set against the wall.

Jusetsu blew across the candlestick. A smoky white flame appeared and flickered. No incense was burning, but there was a strong aroma—like musk—hanging in the air.

Jusetsu bowed her head in front of the altar. On the wall behind it was a drawing of a big, black, birdlike magical creature. It had four lustrous wings, the body of a wild boar, and the legs of a monitor lizard. However, its face, and its face alone, was that of a beautiful woman with pale skin and red lips, and an updo adorned with gold and silver gems.

It was a depiction of Uren Niangniang, the goddess who'd come from across the sea. She was the goddess of the night and the lives of all living things.

In the picture, she was surrounded by all different kinds of birds, both big and small—swallows, spotted nutcrackers, bush warblers, mandarin ducks, and even some tiny birds whose names were unknown. They were all family to Uren Niangniang.

Jusetsu took a peony out of her hair and placed it in the glass bowl that sat on the altar. Somewhere in the distance, a bell seemed to ring, and in the blink of an eye, the flower was gone. Jusetsu turned and left the small room, and at the same time, the white flame atop the candlestick vanished without a trace.

When she returned to the main room, she found Shinshin flapping its wings, making a racket. Jusetsu looked over at the doors. She had visitors.

"Dear Raven Consort, are you in?" a woman with a feeble voice asked.

"What do you require of me?" Jusetsu replied curtly.

"There's something I'd like to request of you, if you'd be so kind as to accept," said the woman.

These were lines that Jusetsu had heard countless times before as all of the women that came to visit followed the same script. They'd

been using this stock phrase since the previous Raven Consort was still around, and by this point, she had become tired of hearing it.

“Come in,” she said.

With a flip of her hand, the doors opened, and the party standing at the entrance came into view. There was one lady-in-waiting standing to the side—who must have been the one who spoke—and another woman covering her mouth with a large fan standing behind her. *She must be the lady of status here*, thought Jusetu. She had a court lady who looked like another lady-in-waiting next to her as well, along with two eunuchs holding lights standing guard. The lady with the fan slowly entered the palace. She had one beauty spot near her calm eyes. It didn’t look like it was drawn on with makeup, but rather a natural feature of hers. Her high updo was decorated with a cloisonne hairpin, but she wasn’t dressed in a particularly glamorous way. Despite this, you could tell by the way she carried herself that she was no low-ranking concubine. The strange thing was she had a flower whistle—a beautiful round whistle used to console the dead—hanging from her belt. Those whistles were beautiful and elaborate pieces, and were usually adorned with a hanging pendant or colored thread as decoration. This one was in the shape of a magnolia flower and had many jewels on it.

She sat down in the seat that one of her eunuchs had pulled out for her. Jusetu chose not to sit and stared at her head-on instead. It wasn’t just her eyes that were calm—her face and everything about her appearance gave off an air of cool collectedness. She wore a mint-colored shanqun with a turquoise skirt below it, and her shawl was made from a silk as fine as mist. This refreshing attire seemed to suit her very well.

“Why don’t you sit down?” the woman said in a voice as calm as her appearance, gesturing toward the chair opposite her.

Jusetu sat down, still keeping her eyes fixed on her visitor. The woman gave a signal, and her ladies-in-waiting stepped back toward the door in apparent comprehension. Then she turned toward Jusetu once more.

“My name is Kajo, daughter of the Un family. I’m the consort that resides in the Eno Palace.”

Jusetu was surprised at how willingly she gave her name and status. Most people who visited her didn’t want to reveal their

identities. The consort who lived the Enō Palace was second only to the empress. Since this consort was given the Enō Palace, she was also given the title of the Mandarin Duck Consort—as the characters used to write the name of her palace also meant “mandarin duck.”

Koshun still didn’t have an empress, so this woman was essentially the highest-ranking consort in the entire palace. *What on earth could she want from me?* Jūsetsu thought suspiciously.

“And your request is?” Jūsetsu asked concisely.

Kajo gazed intently at Jūsetsu’s face. She was acting in quite an unreserved and straightforward way, considering she was a consort.

“I hear that His Majesty often finds himself at your residence,” she said, sounding somewhat amused. “Why might that be?”

Jūsetsu frowned without noticing she was doing it. “I don’t know what he wants from me. He just comes around for a little while, and then he leaves.”

Even with the jade earring case closed, Koshun was still coming over. This proved nothing more than a nuisance for Jūsetsu.

Kajo nodded, as if she’d come to understand something. “So you act as his adviser?”

“I’m nothing of the sort.”

“He doesn’t have any requests for you?”

Jūsetsu looked at Kajo. She was a slender woman, even taller than Jūsetsu—so naturally, she had to look *up* at her. “He did, on one occasion. I won’t tell you what it was about.”

Kajo knitted her brows in a moment of contemplation. “He didn’t...request a killing curse by any chance, did he?”

What a strange thing to say, Jūsetsu thought, tilting her head to one side curiously. “He’s the emperor. If he wanted someone dead, he could easily behead them without the need for a *curse*.”

Kajo’s eyes narrowed as she smiled. Then she gave a satisfied nod. “You’re right. But there are many in the inner palace who *don’t* understand that.”

“What do you mean?”

“His Majesty convicted the empress dowager. Some people say that he asked you to perform a killing curse.”

Jusetsu tilted her head to the other side. “She was executed. How could that be a curse? That’s illogical.”

Kajo smiled even wider. “Precisely. She was simply punished for her own crimes.”

“In that case, why would people say it was a curse killing?”

“Some people can’t be reasoned with. There’s some jealousy going around as well—jealousy toward you.”

“Toward *me*?”

“They’re jealous because His Majesty is paying you frequent visits when he’s barely even visiting his *real* concubines.”

Jusetsu scowled, feeling deeply uncomfortable with this comment. “He isn’t coming to see me in *that* sense.”

“Of course not. I mean, you are the Raven Consort,” Kajo said with an unruffled nod. “I’m sure he has his intentions.”

Jusetsu didn’t know whether he did or not. Sometimes, he brought her confections as a gift, and other times, he would just come and doze on Jusetsu’s bed without asking permission. He simply did as he pleased.

“Did you only come here to find out what was going on?” Jusetsu asked.

Kajo looked down with a faint smile. “I came to confirm it for myself. What goes on inside the inner palace is my business, after all.”

The highest-ranking consort indeed acted as the owner of the inner palace. In other words, Kajo was in charge of all the goings-on in the inner palace.

“It’s been a pleasure to meet you. You’ve taken a weight off my mind.” With that, Kajo stood up.

“Didn’t you have a request for me?” *Or was that just a front?* Jusetsu wondered silently.

Kajo glanced at her, then started mouthing something. Without making a sound, she mouthed the words, “See you tomorrow.”

It must have been something she didn’t want her ladies-in-waiting knowing. *Whatever it is, I hope it’s not too much of a nuisance*, Jusetsu thought to herself.

Kajo turned away from Jusetu, both her flower whistle and the tassels hanging below it swaying as she moved. For some reason, this image stuck in Jusetu's head.

The eunuchs lit their candles again, and the group left in the same quiet way in which they had come.

"Hua niangniang is stunning, isn't she?" Jiujiu said with a sigh—she was crouching in the corner of the room on standby, but now came back over to Jusetu. Jusetu was still keeping her as her lady-in-waiting.

"Hua niangniang?"

"That's what most people in the inner palace call her."

"Is that because her name is spelled using the character for 'flower'?" The character for "flower" could also be read as "hua."

"That's one reason—but you must have seen that flower whistle hanging from her belt, didn't you? It's supposed to be bad luck to wear one, but she always does anyway..."

Originally, flower whistles were hung on the eaves of a building at the end of the winter season to mourn those who passed away that year. It was said that the dead would return with the wind that signaled the coming of spring and sound the whistle when they did. These whistles, made of gemstones, ceramic, or clay, were created in the shape of flowers and had holes for air to flow through. Whenever the wind blew, it would let out a weak, high-pitched sound, like that of a bird chirping.

"Why would she have one hanging from her belt?"

"Nobody knows. Apparently, she refuses to say."

"Goodness."

She was certainly a unique consort. It was mysterious that she should choose to wear a flower whistle on her person, but it also didn't feel like she possessed the obsessive passion that the other women who visited Jusetu shared. The only feeling she gave off was that of a refreshing breeze. She was...

"She wasn't even angry that His Majesty is paying you frequent visits. I knew she wouldn't be," Jiujiu said in admiration.

"She probably just knew that he was only coming here to waste time."

“Come on, that’s not it. She wasn’t angry because she has no *need* to be. She and His Majesty know each other inside and out.”

“That’s to be expected, since she *is* ranked as his second consort. As long as he doesn’t have an empress, she’s on top.”

“You’re missing the point! Those two are childhood friends. I think she’s about three years older than him, though.”

“Childhood friends?”

“She’s Grand Chancellor Un’s granddaughter, you see. The Un family is part of the ‘Five Last Names, Seven Clans’ group of reputable families. Grand Chancellor Un has been a close adviser to the emperor since he was the crown prince, and it’s because of that link that they used to play together as kids. She goes easy on him since she’s known him for so long.”

The group she referred to was a renowned collection of seven prestigious clans, two of which shared last names with other clans.

“Is that so?” Jusetsu replied, but it was clear that it was just a half-hearted attempt to make it seem like she cared.

“You really ought to take more interest in what goes on in the inner palace,” Jiujiu said in a huff. “There’s no point even *talking* to you about it.”

Jusetsu honestly couldn’t care less about the relationships that went on in her inner palace. However, Kajo’s flower whistle had piqued her curiosity, just slightly. Jusetsu dismissed Jiujiu and went to bed.

Kajo had said, “See you tomorrow.” She must have been planning on returning with a request.

The next morning, Jusetsu woke up, got out of bed, and headed for the kitchen, still dressed in her nightclothes. The elderly lady who worked as Jusetsu’s servant was bending over the hearth, starting a fire. Next to her, So Kogyo was chopping some parsley. As soon as she noticed Jusetsu was there, she gave her a polite bow. Now that she was well, Jusetsu had taken her in. Jusetsu had told her this was because her aging servant was starting to feel uneasy about taking on all the kitchen work by herself.

Jusetsu went up to the water jug in the corner of the room, scooped up some water with a ladle, and tipped it into a silver tub. Just

as she was going to carry it away, she heard a voice coming from behind her.

“Hey, niangniang! Didn’t I tell you I’d bring you water if you wanted some?!” Jiujiu called out.

Jusetsu’s loose hair covered her face somewhat, and she looked around slightly.

“I *am* here, so I may as well help you with getting ready in the morning. Otherwise, what’s the point in me staying?”

Jiujiu was keen to help. After all, she was here under the pretense of being Jusetsu’s lady-in-waiting.

“I’ve done fine by myself for all this time. I don’t require any assistance.”

“But that means...” Jiujiu slumped her shoulders dejectedly.

Jusetsu hesitated. “Okay then,” she relented. “Help get my breakfast ready. I’m sure you’ve already had more than enough experience on that front.”

Jiujiu happily accepted her command and began her work in the kitchen, taking to it like a fish to water.

Jusetsu went back into the main room and sighed. *What a hassle.*

She knew that having unnecessary people in the palace wouldn’t be a good idea. She was actually planning on sending Kogyo and Jiujiu back to where they came from once she had no further use for them. If they stayed around forever, she didn’t know when her true identity might come out. Koshun might have overlooked it, but if it were to be made public, not even he could protect her. The law dictated that all members of the previous dynasty’s imperial family were to be eradicated.

Despite this, she already ended up getting used to Jiujiu’s boisterousness and her skylark-like twittering, as well as the protective looks Kogyo gave her. It was eating away at her. Whenever she tried to imagine what the place would be like without them, her heart froze over—it felt like the cold rising from beneath her feet in the wintertime, as if it were chilling her to the bone.

As brutal as it might have sounded, she hadn’t had any desire to establish emotional bonds with anyone. They would only end up causing cracks in her facade.

Something that Reijo—the previous Raven Consort—once said to her came flooding back. “Don’t get yourself a lady-in-waiting,” she insisted, “and you only need one servant. The more people you let your guard down around, the more danger you’ll find yourself in.”

She washed her face with the water in the tub and dried it with a hand towel. She then put her arms through the sleeves of her black robe and tied up her hair. She peered into her octagonal mirror, which had a mother-of-pearl inlay. Her face was pale, and her silver eyelashes fluttered sorrowfully. She could never, ever let Jiujiu and Kogyo see her like this. After applying her makeup, she checked her reflection once more just to make sure that none of her hair had faded, and walked away from the mirror.

When she opened the curtains, she found that breakfast was ready. Rice gruel with parsley and pine nuts was laid out on the table along with mantou steamed buns, all ready for her.

While she was eating, Jiujiu brought over some warm soy milk.

“Would you like me to bring you seconds?”

“No,” Jusetsu said with a steamed bun in her mouth, shaking her head.

Koshun knew her secret, and Jiujiu and Kogyo were now living with her. Little by little, it felt like cracks were beginning to show in her mask—but not even Jusetsu knew how far those fractures would stretch. She just felt like there was darkness awaiting her and a shadow looming over her heart. Would Uren Niangniang be able to give her the answers she was looking for?

The prime cause of her issues was Koshun, however. The problems had all started with his first visit.

And the perpetrator himself arrived after sunset.

“I heard that Kajo paid you a visit.”

That was the very first thing that came out of his mouth. Eisei was standing behind him, just like he always did. The emperor calmly sat himself down in a chair as if it was his own room. Jusetsu frowned at him.

“She only visited because you keep coming here. You ought to hurry up and visit your other consorts instead.”

“I visit them as much as I need to—just enough for them not to

start nagging me about it.”

“No need to bother coming here then. Leave.”

“Did Kajo have a request for you?” Koshun asked, ignoring what Jusetsu had said.

“...No. She said she’d give me one on her next visit.”

“Right,” said Koshun simply. His attitude suggested that he might know what Kajo’s request was going to be.

“Are you aware of what her request entails?” Jusetsu asked.

After a short pause, Koshun answered, “I think so.”

It was impossible to infer what he was thinking from his emotionless expression. *This man makes me feel like winter is in the air*, thought Jusetsu. Quiet and still, his demeanor felt warm in the sunny spots, but there was something lurking in the shadows.

“That consort—” Jusetsu began to say, but then she shifted her eyes toward the doors.

Shinshin was flapping its wings about.

“...Hello.” She heard a woman’s voice. This voice belonged to... Kajo. “It’s me. Could you let me in?”

Jusetsu moved her hand, as if to beckon her in. The doors opened. Kajo was standing there, accompanied by two ladies-in-waiting. Kajo gave them a meaningful look, then came inside by herself. Her ladies-in-waiting stayed put outside, and the doors shut in front of them. Once Kajo walked up to Jusetsu and Koshun, she gave the emperor a bow.

Koshun stood up. “If you have a request for the Raven Consort, I should probably excuse myself.”

“There’s no need for that. You are welcome to stay,” Kajo said with a smile.

There were only two seats, so Jiujiu and Kogyo hurriedly carried a chair in from another room. Once they had done this, Kajo sat down on it.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I’m happy for you to listen in, Your Majesty.”

“...If you insist.”

Koshun sat himself back down. In a way, it almost seemed like

Kajo was the one taking the initiative here. Their dynamic resembled that of a younger brother and an older sister rather than a man and woman or a married couple—and it probably wasn't just because of their age difference. This pair was...

"I'd like you to have a look at this."

Kajo took the flower whistle that had been hanging from around her waist and placed it on the table. It was made with gemstones and tinged a pale, sea-green color. It was shaped like a magnolia. There were several holes drilled into its petals so that it could make sounds, but...

"This whistle has always been silent. It was made for the sake of one particular person, but it's never made a sound. Why do you think that could be?"

Jusetsu took the flower whistle in hand. It was well-made, and certainly not defective.

"Could it be because that person isn't coming back to me?"

The sounding of the whistle was a sign that the person you were mourning had come back to you. If it didn't make a sound, it meant that the person hadn't returned.

"...Who was this person, exactly?" Jusetsu asked.

"He was my lover," Kajo replied, her expression staying the same.

Jusetsu glanced at Koshun. He looked as emotionless as always. He must have known about this man.

"Three years ago, he...O Genyu, he passed away. That spring, I hung up this flower whistle for the first time and waited for his soul to return, but..."

The flower whistle hadn't made a sound.

"Why might that have been? Why wouldn't he come back to me?"

Kajo's tone of voice was calm, but Jusetsu felt like this was the first time she'd seen a tinge of emotion from her. Her feelings were there, for her deceased lover. Jusetsu looked at Koshun again, then stared at Kajo.

"Could you sound the flower whistle for me? Perhaps you could use it to call him."

"Is that your request?"

Kajo nodded. "Yes."

Jusetsu placed the flower whistle back down on the table.
"All right. Let's attempt to summon his soul."

Kajo's eyes opened wide in surprise. "You could do that for me?"

"I'm only able to summon a soul from paradise on one occasion. Make sure you understand that."

Jusetsu brought over an inkstone and a brush from a cabinet. As she was crushing the ink, she asked, "Was 'Genyu' the name he was given after he came of age?"

It was customary for boys to be given a new name when entering adulthood.

"Yes."

"What was his real name?"

"He was called Sho."

She took a small piece of lotus petal-shaped paper from her breast pocket and wrote his real name, "O Sho," on it. She placed it on the table, then lay the flower whistle down on top of it.

Jusetsu then took a peony out of her hairdo and blew on it. The flower turned to smoke, surrounding the flower whistle. The whistle gradually became one with the smoke and melted away into obscurity. Kajo moved to stand, but when she saw that Jusetsu was unbothered, she sat back down again. Jusetsu reached her right hand into the smoke. The smoke was cool and clung to her fingers like soft, smooth mud. Jusetsu tried to beckon the soul to come to her—as if she were reeling in something on a thread—but something felt off. She scowled.

Does this mean...?

Jusetsu removed her hand and let out a puff of air to clear the smoke. It dispersed and the flower whistle began to take shape again. By the time the smoke was completely gone, the flower whistle had returned to its original form.

"I can't do it," she declared shamefully.

"What?" replied Kajo. "What do you mean?"

"The soul you are looking for could not be found in paradise, so my invocation of his soul didn't even get a response."

“Does that mean...?”

“Either this Genyu man is still alive, or his soul can’t be summoned for another reason.”

Kajo’s eyes looked like as if they were welling up with tears. She was clearly perplexed. “He’s not alive. I identified his body myself, and his funeral took place long ago. What did you mean by ‘another reason’?”

“I don’t know. This is the first time I haven’t been able to summon somebody’s soul.”

Reijo had told Jusetsu that it wasn’t always possible, but this was the first time she had experienced it for herself.

“Under what circumstances did he pass away?” Jusetsu asked.

It wasn’t Kajo that answered this time, but Koshun.

“Three years ago, O Genyu was assigned to the province of Reki as a military counsellor and a subordinate to the governor. He was embroiled in the uprising that happened there and lost his life. Somebody threw a stone, and as a matter of bad luck, it hit him in the head.”

As it turned out, Koshun was also acquainted with Genyu and saw his dead body as well. That all happened before he ascended the throne.

“He was an excellent official. That’s why he was posted to Reki Province. At the time, a religion called the True Teachings of the Moon was gaining traction. It was rumored to have worryingly close links with the government, so we instated a new governor to investigate. The uprising was instigated by the religion’s followers.”

In the end, the uprising was suppressed, and the religion died out.

“The True Teachings of the Moon... I’ve never heard of that.”

It wasn’t uncommon for people to make claims like having received a divine oracle and build a shrine out of nowhere, or to worship a piece of driftwood that had washed ashore as a deity. In the worst-case scenario, there may even have been more new shrines like that than there were for Uren Niangniang. Worshipping her seemed like a thing of the past now.

“Apparently, it wasn’t about worshipping the moon. There was just a person known as Elder Moonlight who was revered like a living

god. The first character of the name he was known by was the character for ‘moon.’ He was rumored to be able to predict the future and guess the past, but I am told that he may have been some kind of shaman. It was extremely shady, but he was caught after the uprising. He received a caning as punishment for deceiving the public and then was exiled.”

“A shaman...?”

That meant he was a civilian spellcaster. Whereas some were highly skilled at incantation, others were simply scam artists. This so-called Elder Moonlight could have been either of the two—they just didn’t know.

After a moment’s contemplation, Jusetsu looked over at Koshun. “I’d like to know a bit more about that ‘Moonlight’ person now.”

“Elder Moonlight? Fine. He might not be alive though,” explained the emperor.

The punishment called caning sounded simple, but it actually involved as many as a hundred thrashings with a hard cane. It was practically capital punishment. Even if someone didn’t die during the caning itself, most people were half-dead when they were released and passed away shortly after.

Kajo held the flower whistle carefully in her hands and gazed at it. “Will this whistle be able to sound?”

Jusetsu hesitated for a moment. She eventually gave the other woman an honest answer. “I don’t know.”

Kajo smiled slightly, then stroked the flower whistle with her fingers. “I’m counting on your help.” She stood up gracefully, waved the sleeves of her robe, and headed toward the doors. Even the smooth, flowing rustle of her clothes sounded refreshingly beautiful.

After Kajo had left, taking her ladies-in-waiting with her, Jusetsu looked at Koshun out of the corner of her eye. “Why is she in the inner palace?”

“What did you say?” Koshun replied, his eyebrows twitching. “What do you mean by that?”

“She’s still longing for her deceased lover and doesn’t even attempt to conceal it from you. And even so, you tolerate it. She can’t be your wife.”

This also explained why she didn’t seem to have any feelings of

passion for Koshun whatsoever.

A hint of embarrassment appeared on the emperor's otherwise blank face. "Kajo is like a big sister to me."

"Then why would you put her in the inner palace?"

"Her grandfather is my close aide, as well as my mentor. It was the best thing to do to keep our association strong. And also..." Koshun looked over at the doors that Kajo had walked out of for a moment. "After Genyu died, she had nowhere to go. Now that her partner was dead, she was obliged to marry somebody else. She didn't think that was right, so I gave her a place here instead."

The implication was that she may have chosen to kill herself if she were forced to marry another.

"I thought she'd be able to live a quiet life and honor his memory here, but...things didn't go the way I hoped they would." He said these last few words with a slight sigh. "I never expected that the flower whistle wouldn't sound. It's not defective, is it?"

Koshun sounded concerned, so—even though Jusetsu found his behavior suspicious—she shook her head.

"I see. That's good, then. I was the one who made it, you see."

"You *made* it?" Jusetsu said, the unexpectedness of Koshun's statement causing her to let out an inappropriate-sounding reaction. She coughed to try to distract him from it. "Don't you mean you had it made?"

"I make things like that as a pastime. Someone taught me how to do it a long time ago."

It was said that everyone possessed a special skill of some kind. It seemed like Koshun was skilled at handiwork.

"Maybe I should make something for you too," he said.

The look on his face was so blank that Jusetsu couldn't tell whether he was joking or not. "I don't want anything," she replied without hesitation.

Eisei shot daggers at her from his eyes as he stood behind Koshun.

"If you don't need anything from me, you should leave as well. And never come back."

"I'll be back," replied the emperor.

It seemed like he wasn't listening to a word of what she was saying.

"This isn't a place that the emperor should be visiting. The Raven Consort and the emperor do not go together."

This made Koshun frown a little. "What do you mean by...?"

Before he got the chance to finish his question, Jusetsu opened the doors with a wave of her hand and silently urged him to leave. Koshun obediently stood up. He knew that if he defied her, Jusetsu would just use her skills to force him out instead.

After Koshun and Eisei had left, Jusetsu spent a while sitting in her chair, thinking.

Just why wouldn't that flower whistle sound?

The next day, after she finished breakfast, she put on the court lady ruqun that Koshun had given her some time ago and left the Yamei Palace. If she was going to wander around the inner palace, that outfit was more convenient.

"Niangniang, wait for me!" called Jiujiu as she followed Jusetsu, who was walking briskly ahead of her. "Are you really going, then? Are you really going to see Hua niangniang?"

"Yes," replied Jusetsu.

As she walked along the white sand path, a magnificent palace came into view in front of her. It had decorative tiles depicting mandarin ducks on its tiled roof. The same bird was also drawn on the hanging lanterns. The building had vivid vermilion pillars that looked beautiful in the fine weather. The palace was surrounded by a hedge of red roses in full bloom that filled the air with a sweet and pure scent. Jusetsu stepped onto the cobblestones laid out in front of the palace and headed toward the entrance.

"You should get some flowers planted at the Yamei Palace too..." Jiujiu said enviously. She gazed at the red roses that were growing next to the paving stones.

"Flowers won't grow there," Jusetsu explained.

"What? Really? How come?"

Before Jusetsu could reply, they heard a voice coming from

behind them. "You can have one, if you like."

It was Kajo, with a number of ladies-in-waiting accompanying her. That was what life as a consort was supposed to be like. She ordered the lady-in-waiting by her side to cut off one of the roses for her, and then she gave it to Jusetsu. Even its thorns had been properly removed. Jusetsu placed the red flower in Jiujiu's hair. It was a fairly small flower, almost the size of a rosebud, but it suited Jiujiu perfectly. The young woman smiled shyly. Then, Kajo got another stalk, and this time, gave it to Jiujiu. She then placed it in Jusetsu's hair.

"That looks lovely on you, niangniang," she said.

She couldn't see her flower herself, but she gently touched the petals with her finger. "...Thank you." The fingertip she touched the petals with felt a little warmer now.

"Anyway, please, let me show you in," said Kajo, gesturing toward the palace directly in front of them.

Jusetsu and Jiujiu joined Kajo up on the paving stones with the gaggle of ladies-in-waiting following from behind. Jusetsu turned back toward the passage that linked to the neighboring palace. For the past few minutes, court ladies had been using it, coming and going hurriedly. They were all carefully carrying boxes with both hands.

"These are items that the sea merchants brought," Kajo said, following Jusetsu's gaze. "They've got everything from glass bowls and silver tubs to belts adorned with jewels... They bring over all sorts of unique items from the lands across the sea."

In short, these were gifts from the merchants who served the inner palace.

"Would you like to have a look?" Kajo asked, but Jusetsu shook her head.

Jiujiu looked disappointed.

When they were in Kajo's home, the consort told her ladies-in-waiting to go and sort out the gifts. She then boiled some tea in an iron pot without any assistance. "Is this about the flower whistle?" she asked.

Flower-patterned rugs sat at her feet, and screens featuring splendid brocades were used as room partitions. Even the tablecloth over the table was embroidered with images of mandarin ducks.

“I wanted to ask you about O Genyu,” said Jusetsu.

Kajo had been stirring the hot water with a spoon, but her hand immediately froze. “About Genyu...? What did you want to know?”

“Any information you have will suffice. I want to hear what you know about him.”

She already asked Koshun to tell her about Elder Moonlight, so now Jusetsu wanted to gather information on Genyu himself.

“Well... Genyu was like boiled water once it cools down.” As she gazed at the hot water inside the pot, a smile appeared on her face.

“He was warm and gentle... As passionate as he was, he never used that fervor to hurt others. But once boiled water has cooled a bit, it only stays at the right temperature for so long. His fate was similar—it came around for him before we knew it.”

Kajo scooped out the tea leaves, poured some tea into a cup, and then passed it to Jusetsu.

“Cooled, boiled water is good for you,” Jusetsu said simply, blowing on her drink. After letting it cool down, she took a slow sip of the tea. She found herself engulfed by its fragrance, and its warmth gradually filled her stomach.

“He didn’t come from a distinguished family,” Kajo went on. “He worked his way up after passing the imperial examination and became an official. My grandfather paid special attention to him and sent him to Reki Province. If he was successful there, he would be able to get promoted. Genyu knew he wouldn’t be able to marry me without a respectable title of his own, so he bravely set out to make that happen. I should have stopped him. It was too high a price to pay for...”

Kajo’s trembling voice trailed off. Her face became distorted for a second by the steam rising in front of her. Then, she took her cup and drank all her tea in one gulp.

“...This isn’t the correct way to enjoy tea.” Kajo poured herself another cup. This time, she blew on it slightly, and brought the drink to her mouth.

“Perhaps his soul has gotten lost somewhere in Reki Province. As intelligent as he was, he could be so careless at times...”

“That is a common occurrence,” said Jusetsu.

Kajo had been staring at her cup, but suddenly looked up. “Really? In that case, would you be able to lead him in the right direction?”

“It’s a possibility. We could invoke his soul and then send it over to paradise.”

The look in Kajo’s eyes suggested that this instilled her with hope. Jusetsu felt a little guilty, wondering if she had sounded overly optimistic. It wasn’t that Genyu’s soul was lost—it just couldn’t be *found*. Reijo once said that the Raven Consort shouldn’t be unnecessarily sympathetic toward those who requested help—but in front of Kajo, she couldn’t help but want to sound somewhat encouraging.

Jusetsu didn’t use to be like this. She had never interacted with people. Nothing good ever came from unsettled emotions—they clouded your judgment. Emotions leave you confused, with no idea how to proceed.

“Raven Consort. What is His Majesty to you?”

Somewhat shaken, it took Jusetsu a while to react to Kajo’s question. “...Excuse me? What do you mean?”

“His Majesty seems a little different as of late. It all started when he met you.”

Jusetsu cocked her head to the side in confusion, while Kajo continued to explain her thoughts.

“For some reason, he was never one to let his emotions show, and yet, when it comes to you, he does.”

“He still looks as impassive as ever when I see him.”

“That may well be true, but whenever His Majesty speaks to me *about* you, he appears more emotive than usual.”

That’s just because he has his guard down around you, thought Jusetsu. *I doubt it has anything to do with me*. She realized that this opinion would be a hassle to express, however, so she decided not to.

“I can’t envision that man being anything close to ‘emotive,’” Jusetsu commented, then slurped her tea.

Kajo smiled wearily. “Yes... It might be hard to imagine now, but when he was little, he was unrestrained with his emotions. One day he’d be laughing out loud, and the next day he’d be angry. He only

stopped showing his feelings when the Teiran incident occurred, and then...”

“Teiran?” repeated Jusetsu.

“Are you not familiar with him?”

“No,” Jusetsu replied, causing Kajo to hesitate for a brief moment.

“He was a eunuch who worked for His Majesty since he was very young. Despite his role, His Majesty grew very attached to him. Unfortunately, though...he died a terrible death. At the hands of the empress dowager.”

She bowed her head with a look of melancholy on her face. She was probably reflecting on those painful days.

Jusetsu happened to remember something that Koshun once said. *“That woman killed my mother and my friend.”*

The woman he was talking about was the empress dowager. He’d said that on the night of her execution.

“Would he be the ‘friend’ that Koshun mentioned?”

Kajo looked up at her and blinked. “Yes. That was him. His Majesty referred to him as a friend,” Kajo nodded, lowering her voice somewhat. “Make sure not to mention his name in front of His Majesty. You would not want to reopen old wounds.”

It sounded as if this loss had hurt him deeply. Jusetsu almost thought back on how Koshun had acted that night, then shook her head to get the image out of her mind. It was better not to think too much about these things. It wasn’t her place to imagine how he might have been feeling. She was dangerously close to getting swept away by her emotions, as it was.

“He and I have never engaged in friendly conversation,” Jusetsu said brusquely. She then got up to her feet.

“Are you going home already?” asked Kajo, sitting up as well.

Jusetsu charged toward the doors, and Jiujiu—who had been waiting by her side—was left to hurriedly catch up with her.

She proceeded down the steps and went to leave the palace area, but then she suddenly stopped in her tracks. She glanced over at the palace next door. It seemed like the court ladies were still there, busy sorting out gifts.

Jusetsu tilted her head to the side. Maybe it was just her imagination, but she had a funny feeling that there was a ghost around. If something *were* there, it must have only stayed for a moment because before long, she couldn't sense it anymore. There were many ghosts in the inner palace that appeared out of nowhere, only to disappear again a few seconds later. Perhaps this was one of those. She couldn't afford to worry about every single one of them, after all.

She began walking again, her shoes clacking against the cobblestones as she went. Unbeknownst to her, however, a set of eyes followed her from afar as she set off back home.

In the distance, she could hear the eunuchs on night watch announcing the time, accompanied by the sound of drumming. Once it finished, Jusetsu opened her eyes. She got out of her bed and opened the fine silk curtains. Shinshin was making a fuss.

"Is he here?" she whispered to the bird. She then opened the doors with a wave of her finger.

Koshun had arrived—with Eisei naturally tagging along behind, like his shadow.

"This'll come as no surprise, but it turns out that Elder Moonlight is dead," he announced once he'd sat down.

"Are you certain?"

"He was sentenced to a caning and subsequent exile from the province, but apparently, he died before the hundred lashes were completed. He was so emaciated that his body couldn't withstand it."

"That's understandable, if he was elderly."

"Not exactly. He might have been called 'Elder,' but he wasn't *old*."

"Why would they call him that, then?"

"Nobody knew for sure. His real name is a mystery too. He appeared out of nowhere, and before long, he gained a reputation for his divination and fortune telling. People say he could use illusory magic as well. Also..."

Koshun paused for a moment to quickly scan the room. Jiujiu had already been dismissed, so there was nobody else around.

“...I heard another rumor about him too. Apparently, he was a member of the previous dynasty’s imperial family.”

Jusetsu felt her face tense up. “Surely not?”

“I’m not sure what the basis for those rumors was. I just know that there have been whispers about it. It may have just been a random comment of some sort—a ruse to help him gather followers, perhaps.”

It must have been. Swindlers often convinced people that they were actually an illegitimate child of an emperor, or that they were the sergeants connected to some prestigious family.

“What kind of divination, fortune telling, and illusory magic did he do?”

“Silly things. Finding people’s missing belongings, accusing people of murders that no one knew about, and exposing secret affairs. One of his strong points was predicting the weather. As far as the illusory magic goes, he once got a phantom tiger to attack someone who was making fun of him, and another time, he turned a stick into a serpent. Who knows how much of that is true?”

“A phantom? That must have been shapeshifting magic...”

This was what shamans specialized in, but Jusetsu couldn’t grasp exactly how powerful Elder Moonlight was. Finding missing items and predicting the weather were things that even fraudsters could do. If the illusory magic stuff was real, however, he must have truly been a shaman of some sort.

Koshun watched Jusetsu get lost in thought and carried on speaking. “There’s another rumor too. People say that there wasn’t just one Elder Moonlight. At times, he seemed like he was a different person—as if he was experiencing divine possession.”

“It wasn’t a twin, then?”

“One government official suspected that might be so and carried out a thorough investigation, but if that was the case, then the other one would have been able to remain at large. It didn’t seem like that was what was going on though.”

“Oh...” The more Jusetsu heard, the less she understood.

Who actually was Elder Moonlight?

“That’s about it. If I find out anything else, I’ll let you know.”

With that, Koshun promptly stood up. This was unusual—he always dawdled about her palace, even when Jusetsu tried to forcibly kick him out.

“I’m going to see Kajo tonight,” he said.

“I didn’t ask,” Jusetsu replied.

Koshun put his hand in his breast pocket and took out a brocade drawstring bag, tossing it at Jusetsu. As it flew toward her, she had no choice but to put her hand out and catch it. The bag landed in her hand.

“Don’t throw things at me.”

“They’re dried apricots,” said the emperor. “Have them.”

Koshun often left things like this with Jusetsu when he visited. This behavior was not to her liking—it was as if he were feeding a pet monkey—but the food did taste good.

“...Kajo said that you’ve been acting unusual as of late,” Jusetsu said as she peered inside the bag.

“Unusual? In what way?”

“She said you’ve become more ‘emotive.’”

Jusetsu didn’t mention that this allegedly happened whenever he talked about her. With a blank look on his face, Koshun curiously tilted his head to one side.

“She must be mistaken,” he said, closing the topic in one simple line.

With that, he left the palace.

How could a man like that be ‘emotive’? Jusetsu thought to herself. She placed an apricot in her mouth and spent a short while watching him walk off into the distance.

The smell of red roses was strong in the still night air. Koshun walked between the flowers, shrouded in darkness, and approached the Eno Palace. Kajo was waiting in front of the steps with her ladies-in-waiting. Eisei, holding up a light, took a step back. Kajo lowered herself to her knees to bow to Koshun. She used to be a real tomboy—always beating Koshun in games of tag—but she had grown into a graceful woman. As much as this impressed Koshun, he knew he’d only get an extremely sarcastic response if he were to tell her as much, so he

decided to stay quiet.

Having dismissed her ladies-in-waiting, she now offered her guest some tea. "Have you paid the Raven Consort a visit, Your Majesty?" Kajo said.

"I did."

Kajo gave Koshun an odd, silent look. She had a smile on her face, but it was clear that it was a reproachful one. Criticizing people without using any words had long been a habit of hers.

"I just went to report something to her," he continued. Naturally, his tone made it sound like he was making excuses. The scene seemed like a younger brother being scolded by his sister.

Kajo let out a sigh. "You ought not to visit her as frequently as you do. It causes unfavorable rumors to circulate."

"I'm not going *that* frequently," Koshun argued.

"The Raven Consort is not like your other consorts. She's not the sort of woman that you can do what you like with, Your Majesty. You're being a nuisance, even to her. Why are you getting so childishly attached?"

"Attached?"

"You must be."

"I...just want to meet with her and talk. That's all it is."

Jusetsu's responses interested him. He wanted to know what she'd say about things, what kind of faces she'd make... He couldn't help but go and see her.

"If you just want to talk, then talk to one of your other consorts. Chatting is not the Raven Consort's job. You are taking advantage of her kindness, Your Majesty."

"What kindness?"

Jusetsu was the kind of girl who'd immediately use force to get rid of you if she didn't like what was happening.

"She's a considerate person. She'd never be able to bring herself to cut someone down. That's why she was kind enough to listen to my request."

Koshun gazed at his cup of tea. Gentle steam was rising from it.

Kajo had a point. Even when they were investigating the jade earring, Jusetsu had taken pity upon the ghost. It was that sympathy that motivated her to work hard to remedy things.

“Do not cause trouble that will end up harming her unnecessarily. You’ll regret it, Your Majesty.”

“...Fine,” Koshun answered obediently.

He’d never been able to oppose her.

During the third jing—the time period between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m.—Koshun left the Eno Palace. It was even darker now, and the scent of the flowers was just as strong. As Koshun was walking through the red roses, he came to an abrupt halt.

“Is there something different about me?” he asked Eisei, who was following from behind like his shadow.

Eisei was silent for a moment. “With all due respect, I do believe you may have changed in some respects.” He paused, then added, “You’re different when the Raven Consort is involved.”

“Well, that comes as a surprise,” said the emperor in acknowledgement—although it sounded as if he already forgot that the conversation was about him at all.

It wasn’t that he wasn’t aware of it. He *was* interested in Jusetsu. He’d even gone as far as asking her to become one of his proper consorts—although, as she herself implied, he had been half-asleep when he said this.

For instance, sometimes he wondered what she was getting up to in that jet-black palace of hers on a night like this.

Koshun looked up at the sky. The clouds looked like fine silk, with the moon shining through them. The endless black sky reminded him of something else—the wings of a raven.

Jusetsu had a lady-in-waiting and court lady working for her now. Prior to that, she had been living with only one servant who helped out with the bare minimum she was allowed to. Jusetsu was trying to keep on the down-low, hidden from the public eye.

“The Raven Consort...”

Eisei picked up that the emperor was mumbling something. “What did you say, master?”

“No, nothing,” Koshun said, then started walking past the red roses again.

It was calm out that night, but little did the emperor know that an incident was about to unfold the very next day.

The days were long at this time of year. After the first jing—which lasted from seven to nine in the evening—the sky began to turn a deep indigo hue and a messenger left the Eno Palace. The lady-in-waiting who arrived was in such a rush that she was practically running. This was an oddity as ladies-in-waiting who worked for consorts seldom hastened their paces. The fact that this task had been given to a lady-in-waiting rather than a low-ranking court lady or eunuch told Jusetsu one thing—as urgent as it was, they wanted to keep the message a secret.

“Could you please be so kind as to come to the Eno Palace?” the lady-in-waiting pleaded with a hurried bow.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s just...”

The lady-in-waiting was having a coughing fit and drank some of the water that Jiujiu had fetched for her. Jusetsu realized that it’d be quicker just to go than listen to her explanation, so decided to head over to Kajo’s abode. This time, she went dressed in her usual black robe. Under the early evening sky, it looked that much darker. With a flutter of her thin silk shawl—as fine as a scattering of stars—she hurried onward to the Eno Palace.

“You want me to find a missing item for you?” Jusetsu repeated back to the lady-in-waiting by her side as they rushed toward the Eno Palace.

“Yes. It’s one of the items that a merchant offered us the other day...”

Jusetsu felt let down. “What? I thought it was going to be something more serious.”

The lady-in-waiting, however, still looked just as pale. “Trust me, it is serious. It was an offering, so it belongs to His Majesty.”

“Not Kajo, then?”

“It was a present that His Majesty bestowed on niangniang. If it

goes missing, then that responsibility must fall on the shoulders of the court ladies or ladies-in-waiting that brought it over.”

“Responsibility...?”

Did this mean the death penalty? Jusetzu wondered. That must have been why the lady-in-waiting was looking so unwell. And yet, there was more.

“One of our court ladies has also vanished.”

“Do you mean to say that she ran away with the missing item?”

“I’m not sure...but from what the other court ladies are saying, she doesn’t sound like the type of person who’d commit such an appalling act. It’s just...” The lady-in-waiting shook her head in bewilderment. “They also said that she was acting unusual recently.”

“Unusual? What did they mean by that?” Jusetzu asked.

“At times, it was like her entire personality had changed...”

Jusetzu felt like she’d heard this story somewhere before. “As if... she were a different person entirely?”

“Exactly.”

What in the world is happening? Jusetzu thought.

When they arrived at the Eno Palace, the atmosphere was hectic. The court ladies were flurrying about in confusion, perhaps looking for the missing item—or even the court lady in question herself. Kajo came out of the palace and welcomed Jusetzu.

“What is the item that has gone missing?”

“It’s a pot. A copper pot with a seal on it.”

“What kind of seal?”

“A paper one. The inventory listed it as a pitch-pot...”

This was a pot used for throwing arrows into as a game.

“It doesn’t sound like there was anything inside it, but I was intending to open it once I had the emperor’s approval.”

“What about the runaway court lady?”

“She was one of the palace seamstresses. When we realized that the pot was missing and were looking for it, we found out that she, too, had vanished with it.”

Jusetsu gave the area one look around, then asked, “Lead me to that court lady’s room.”

The building that the court ladies resided in was at the edge of the Eno Palace, and several of them shared each room. When they entered the room where the missing court lady used to live, Jusetsu went and stood next to her bed. There was one box sitting on the pillow. She opened it and found a few objects inside, including a comb, some scissors, and a hand towel. It seemed like she kept her personal belongings in there. Her robe was hanging up on the screen next to where Jusetsu stood. All of the items looked as if they could have belonged to any other court lady. Jusetsu looked at her bed and narrowed her eyes slightly, realizing that she sensed a faint sign of a ghost. It was clinging to the bed like hazy, faint smoke. This meant the ghost had been in this spot in the not-so-distant past.

Jusetsu brooded over things for a while, then picked up a few strands of hair that lingered on the mattress. Next, she turned around to face the court ladies who were waiting in the entrance of the room, trying to work out what was going on.

“What was the name of the court lady who disappeared?”

The court ladies looked at each other, then looked behind them and created a path for someone else to get through. It was Kajo.

“Her name was Yo Senjo.”

Jusetsu gave a small nod, then asked for some ink and an inkstone. She then took a small wooden doll out of her pocket and wrote “Yo Senjo” down with a writing brush. Her family name, Yo, was written with the character for “leaf.” She wound the hair around the doll and placed it on top of the mattress. With this done, she pulled a peony out of her hair and blew on it. Its petals scattered like shattered glass, glistening as they rained down on top of the doll.

The doll began to tremble slightly. It swelled up beyond its ordinary size and became distorted. The hair that was wrapped around it was sucked inside of it and the doll turned black. Its body softened like candy. Gradually, it began to take the shape of a bird, sprouting wings and even growing a beak. Its body—which had been putty-like just moments ago—was now covered in feathers, shuddering violently. Its dark eyes lit up, and it flapped its wings up and down. It was a raven.

The raven moved its wings a few more times to get a feel for things and then took flight. It flew through the air and tore from the room, causing the court ladies to let out feeble shrieks. As Jusetsu slipped between them, she told Kajo and her workers to stay put before following the raven on its way.

She chased the bird, leaving the Eno Palace and running right past the red roses. She wouldn't be able to follow it if it left the palace grounds, but it probably hadn't gotten that far yet. She set foot onto the gravel and ran—through the white willows and past the pond. The raven was heading toward the western part of the inner palace. After a while, the raven flew in a circle in the air and began its descent. It was in an area that was densely covered with old pine trees. Jusetsu, too, headed over to where the raven had chosen to stop.

When Jusetsu entered the pine forest, she spotted the raven and stopped in her tracks. The raven was resting on the hand of a girl who was wearing the uniform that the palace seamstresses wore. *She must be the runaway court lady*, Jusetsu deduced. In her other hand, she was holding the copper pot.

“Are you Yo Senjo?” she asked.

With the expression on her face unchanged, the girl opened her mouth to speak. “I don’t even know my own name,” she explained.

Her voice sounded strange—it was like one voice that was fractured, or like it was two sounds combined together. Jusetsu knew exactly what this meant.

It was a duo-vocalization—when one person’s voice sounded like it had split apart. This happened when someone’s soul was in a state of instability, or in other words, when it was being possessed by a ghost.

When Reijo was still in good health, she had an encounter with one such person. After hearing them let out a voice like this, she knew they were possessed by a malevolent ghost. That person hadn’t been acting like their usual self either—and that was exactly what people had said about this court lady. There was another person who Jusetsu had heard being described in that way recently too—Elder Moonlight.

“Who are you?” Jusetsu asked, squaring up to the girl.

She just laughed. Jusetsu then glanced at the pot she was holding. Its opening was covered by a paper seal with some strange lettering written on it.

“Do you have something to do with Elder Moonlight?” Jutsu asked.

The girl raised her eyebrows. “My gosh. Why would you think that?”

“You tamed my raven. That’s something that no ordinary person would be able to do. And the writing on that pot—it’s the shaman word for ‘seal.’ You’re a shaman. People say that Elder Moonlight often seemed as if he were a different person at times. He must have been possessed by a ghost. I’ve also heard, however, that he was skilled at illusory magic and shapeshifting. If he was proficient enough to do that, he *can’t* have been possessed. That means the ghost that possessed him was a talented shaman—a talented shaman like yourself.”

“I see,” said the girl, laughing again—but the very next moment, she smacked the raven aside with a swift strike of her hand.

A dry thud resonated in the air. The raven turned into a black haze and disappeared.

Jutsu bit her lip. This errand bird had been simple to make, but no ordinary shaman would have been able to crush Jutsu’s magic with such ease.

“Who are you?” she asked.

There couldn’t be that many skilled shamans who were now ghosts—and even fewer who would also possess a human to try to manipulate them. This ghost had possessed Elder Moonlight, and now it was taking over this court lady as well.

“Hyogetsu.”

Hyogetsu, a name that meant “ice moon.”

As unexpected as it was, the ghost had readily given its name—but things were about to get more complicated.

“My name is Ran Hyogetsu, dear Raven Consort.”

Jutsu gulped. *Ran?*

That was the last name of the previous dynasty’s imperial family.

“We’ve got the same name. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Jutsu gazed cautiously at the court lady’s face, but it was near impossible to discern the ghost’s true intentions from her since her body was being used as a vessel by the ghost possessing her.

“...My last name is Ryu,” she said cautiously. “I’m not a member of the Ran family.”

This, however, was a fake name that Reijo had given her.

“Your pseudonym doesn’t interest me. My blood is telling me that we share roots, you and me. You’ve done well, surviving this long—especially in a place like this.” There was tenderness in the ghost’s voice. “I was surprised when I found you here. Who would have thought that someone from the Ran family would be the Raven Consort? I thought you’d all been hunted down and died out long ago...”

His voice sounded sad, as if he had sunk into a dark abyss of sorrow.

“I, too, was arrested and beheaded. I might not have a physical body anymore, but whenever I come back to the imperial capital, my blood still runs cold.”

Why would you come here, then? Jusetsu thought. The ghost stared intently at her through the girl’s body, then smiled a little.

“But it must be a stroke of luck that I was able to find someone from the Ran family here. I was so desperate to talk to you that I had you come to me.”

Oh, thought Jusetsu. *That must be why the ghost stole the pot, left its traces in the court ladies’ room, and got me to follow it all the way here.*

“I was a man from the imperial family, but I was a shaman too. I don’t know whether or not you know this, but during the days of the previous dynasty, there were a number of shamans in the imperial estate. The current imperial family hated them, though, and they drove every single one of them out of the capital. That’s why there are so many shamans out in the country now. That man they called Elder Moonlight was one of them—although his skills were of the classic deceptive variety.”

Reijo had once told Jusetsu that the imperial estate used to be full of shamans. They didn’t have an official rank, but were privately favored by the emperor, the royal family, and high-ranking officials. They were even allowed to come and go from the inner palace at their own free will. However, the ghost of Hyogetsu—being both a member of the imperial family *and* a shaman—was in an unusual position, even among his peers.

“Still, that failed shaman guy was still an interesting one. When I possessed his body, he spread rumors saying he was the embodiment of God. I still don’t know whether that was just another swindle or if he genuinely believed it deep down, but he earned plenty of money from it. He extorted cash from both the rich and the poor, stored it in a pot, and buried it in the ground. It’s still there to this day. Should I tell you how to find it?”

Jusetsu responded by simply frowning at him.

Hyogetsu snorted—despite not even seeming amused—then carried on talking. “If you can read this writing, I expect you know what this pot is for. Don’t you?”

Hyogetsu held up the pot. Jusetsu glared at it. The label had the shaman term for “seal,” but it didn’t refer to just any seal—this was specifically a seal used to seal away a soul.

“Whose soul is sealed inside there?” Jusetsu asked.

“Well, it’s definitely not the soul of Elder Moonlight.” Hyogetsu stroked the pot. “A little birdie told me some people wanted to summon the soul of a man who died in the Reki Province uprising.”

Jusetsu frowned even harder. “How do you...?”

“When a soul dies far away from its hometown, it doesn’t know where to go. There were a few drifting around in the air at that time, so I collected them and sealed them away in here. I was planning on using them as messengers, but...” Hyogetsu stared at Jusetsu in the face. “I found another use for them that I didn’t expect.”

“What do you mean?”

Hyogetsu wiped the smirk off his face. “You can have O Genyu’s soul. But in exchange...I have a request for you.”

“A request?” repeated Jusetsu.

“That’s why I came here, to the inner palace.”

His voice was coming from the court lady whose physical form he had embodied, but his earnest zeal was still palpable. This fervor left Jusetsu feeling bewildered.

“Tell me what your request is. What *were* your intentions in coming here?”

“If you’re willing to hear me out, I’ll tell you. But if you can’t...”

Hyogetsu took a knife out of an ornament he was wearing on his belt, then pressed it against his—no, her—neck. “I’ll kill this woman.”

Jusetsu felt the reflexive urge to run up to him, but Hyogetsu was pressing the blade so hard against the court lady’s neck that she stopped herself.

“I’ll kill this woman, and I’ll get away,” he threatened. “O Genyu’s soul would then never come back. So, what do you say? There’s no time for deliberation. If anyone else turns up here, I’ll flee.”

Jusetsu looked around. Regardless of whether Kajo and her court ladies had listened when she’d ordered them to stay put, there was no sign of anyone else in the area for the time being. She couldn’t hear anyone running in this direction either.

“I doubt anybody will,” said Jusetsu. “There’s no need for us to rush. I implore you, put away the knife.”

Hyogetsu didn’t say a word and simply continued pressing the knife against the court lady’s skin.

“You don’t need to threaten me to get me to listen. Just tell me what your request entails.”

“I—”

All of a sudden, the court lady’s expression contorted. It was as if you could see Hyogetsu’s mood shifting through it. He pulled the knife away from his neck. Taken aback, Jusetsu went to move, but before she got the chance, she heard the sharp sound of something flying through the air.

The knife slipped out of the court lady’s hand and a stone rolled away from the spot where it landed on the ground. Said stone had struck the court lady’s hand, knocking the knife away. Jusetsu promptly pulled a peony from her hair, crushed it in her hand, and threw it at the possessed woman. For a moment, it looked like its pale red petals were fluttering downward, but then they trailed in the air like fine smoke and surrounded the pot. With a flick of Jusetsu’s hand, the paper seal silently tore apart, and the pot split in two.

The pine tree’s branches swayed and rustled overhead. A spark-like light flickered inside the pot, and a moment later, it burst. It sounded like thunder ripping through the air, and the court lady collapsed onto the ground. Jusetsu moved the sleeve that she’d been

using to cover her face away and went up to the broken pot.

The breaks in both the pot and the paper were clean—almost as if they'd been split apart with a sword. Jusetsu looked up in the air. A few faint orbs of light fluttered about above her like fireflies. There were four of them, in fact.

“O Sho,” Jusetsu called out to them, reaching out one of her hands. One of the wandering orbs appeared to slide down toward her and landed on her hand. Jusetsu gently cupped it in her hands. In her palms, it transformed into a pale, amber-colored comb. Jusetsu placed it in her hair for the moment.

“Raven Consort,” someone called out.

Jusetsu turned around and a young eunuch with wide, narrow eyes was kneeling before her.

“It was you, Onkei.”

He was the eunuch who'd been assigned as Jusetsu's guard. He had been the one to hit the court lady's hand with the stone. *How long has he been here?* Jusetsu wondered. She had no clue he was in the area at all.

Jusetsu looked back at the woman. The court lady was laying by the roots of one of the pine trees, seemingly unconscious.

“What kind of state is she in?”

“Rest assured, Raven Consort, she has only fainted,” Jusetsu's guard explained, “although she may experience some swelling in her hand.”

Jusetsu nodded, then looked at the scene around her. There was a young man standing beneath a tree a little further away. His face was pale, and although his narrow eyes were glossy, they were clouded with melancholy. He was wearing a silk robe embroidered with magnificent mythical birds—known as “ran”—and his long hair was tied up and swept over his shoulders. It was such a remarkable shade of silver that you could almost have believed that the moonlight itself had converged into it.

“I've failed, Raven Consort... On this occasion, I have lost. But don't you worry—I'll be back,” said the man. Reminiscent of the cool, clear night air in the fall, his voice was as sorrowful as his appearance.

“Wait. What about your request?”

“Raven Consort,” he said, “why are you content with shutting yourself away in the inner palace? If you so wanted, you could have it all.”

With that, Hyogetsu turned away from her. His silver hair seemed to sway in the wind, and then he started to disappear out of sight.

Jusetsu almost started to walk toward him, but instead quickly turned around and looked down at Onkei. His posture and expression remained unchanged, and his eyes were cast downward.

“Did you hear what he said?” said Jusetsu.

“I did not, my lady. What may it have been?”

Jusetsu stared at Onkei for a few moments, then looked away. “Let us return to the Eno Palace.”

She ordered Onkei to bring the court lady with him, then turned back herself.

Kajo had been waiting apprehensively at the Eno Palace. When she saw the court lady that Jusetsu and Onkei were carrying, she ran up to them.

“Is she...?”

“She’s just unconscious. She was possessed by a ghost. Take care of her, won’t you?”

One of Kajo’s ladies-in-waiting showed Onkei to the court ladies’ building. Jusetsu urged Kajo to get the other ladies to give them some privacy, and they went inside the palace.

Jusetsu removed the comb that she had placed in her hair. “This is O Genyu’s soul,” she said, holding it out in her palm.

Kajo looked astonished.

The comb started to lose its shape and transformed into a pale, firefly-like orb of light.

Kajo cautiously extended her hand. The glowing orb wafted over and landed on her palm. She gasped and watched it closely. “It’s... warm.”

Kajo cupped the light in her hands. “But it’s by no means *hot*. It’s like...boiling water, after it’s cooled down...”

Her whispering became quieter, then trailed off into silence. She

held the glowing orb to her chest.

Not all souls became ghosts. Some have no problem getting to paradise, regardless of how they died, whereas others end up as ghosts, stuck in one place forever. The other souls that had been sealed away in the pot all seemed to have avoided this fate and gone on to paradise. Genyu would probably do the same thing—Jusetsu was just holding him back for a little while.

“Oh...”

The glowing orb left Kajo’s hand and floated up into the air. “Wait. Stay a little...” Kajo protested.

The glowing orb flew around her. A wind started to pick up, and the dangling decorations in her hair made faint clinking noises as they knocked into one another. The glowing orb stroked Kajo’s hair and cheeks like a wisp of smoke. The flower whistle hanging from her waist swayed—and, with a high-pitched whistle, it sounded at last.

Its sound lingered in the air. Then came a second and a third sound. It was friendly and cheery, like somebody singing.

Then the wind, which was suffused with a gentle glow, left Kajo and soared high up into the air. The doors to the palace opened on their own accord, and the gust flew outside. Kajo attempted to chase the wind as it glided high into the sky and drifted toward the west—toward the sea.

“Genyu...!”

Even this cry that spilled out of Kajo’s mouth seemed to get blown up toward the glowing gust.

Before long, all glimpses of the faint radiance that the wind left behind were out of sight, but Kajo still stood.

“He’ll come back again,” Jusetsu assured her. “He’ll be back when spring comes.”

Kajo simply nodded silently. Then she covered her face and sank down to the ground.

At a later date, Kajo arrived at the Yamei Palace carrying a silk

robe.

“Please accept this as a thank you for summoning his soul.”

Her lady-in-waiting placed a tray on the table. Jusetu picked up the silk robe that was lying on it. It was a shanqun. Its purple fabric was decorated with a batik design that featured birds and waves. It came with a twill skirt with a circular pearl pattern woven into the fabric. The outfit also came with a shawl the color of cherry blossoms, made of silk so fine that it looked as if it would dissolve if you touched it.

“Oh my gosh! How stunning!” Jiujiu couldn’t help but exclaim from beside Jusetu. But when she realized what she had done, she covered her mouth with her hands.

“I had everything made in my palace. The skirt was stitched by the seamstress that you so kindly helped, Raven Consort.”

Jusetu shoved the tray back toward her. “I have no use for anything like this.”

“Wouldn’t it be useful to have a robe that wasn’t black? You could wear it when you want to walk around incognito—it would suit you far better than that court lady uniform,” Kajo said gently. She pushed the tray back toward Jusetu.

Jusetu, unsure of what to do, looked at both Kajo and the robe in turn.

“If you insist you have no use for it, then I will just have to throw it away. It’d be a shame, considering my court ladies took so much care in dyeing and sewing it for you...”

At that point, Jusetu snapped. This wasn’t the time for her to be so stubborn. “Fine. I’ll take it,” she said.

“I appreciate your courtesy,” Kajo replied. “I’m sure my court ladies will be overjoyed. Please wear it when you come see me at the Eno Palace.”

“But I...”

“I will have some dim sum prepared for you when you decide to visit. And not just that—steamed buns with white honey kneaded into the dough, fuliubing, and... Oh! Some baozi with lotus seed bean paste as well. I’m told that you’re fond of those.”

Jusetu couldn’t say a thing.

It was unbecoming of the Raven Consort to enjoy tea and conversation with another consort in broad daylight. The Raven Consort lived a solitary life and went about her affairs during the night. And yet...

"You're very welcome, anytime you'd like." Kajo said, smiling calmly.

If I had an older sister, I wonder if she'd be like this? Jusetu wondered. Steam rose from the tea Jiujiu had poured, and it was being served alongside simmered apricots in syrup. Kogyo had prepared the sweets for them.

In the same way that the most stubborn snow that held on into the spring would slowly lose out to the sunlight, a warmth was creeping its way into Jusetu's heart. It was an inviting, soft warmth that was extremely difficult to resist. It was practically poison.

That night, Koshun turned up at the palace. Jusetu called for him this time, saying she had a favor to ask.

"What did you need from me, then?" he said.

Jusetu sort of expected him to say something sarcastic, but all she got was this one simple question.

"I want to know more about Ran Hyogetsu," Jusetu answered plainly.

"Oh..." said Koshun, swallowing a mouthful of tea. "I don't know much about him either. I believe he was the child of the emperor's youngest son—the emperor's grandson, in other words. The emperor's youngest son wasn't involved with the central government, and his child, Hyogetsu, was a heretic who joined the ranks of the shamans too. Even so, people say that he had a rare and remarkable gift. He was beheaded on the same day as his father and the emperor. That's about all I know."

"Can you find out a little more?"

At the end of the day, Jusetu still didn't know why Hyogetsu was so fixated on the inner palace, nor what his request would have been. These questions weighed on Jusetu's mind.

"I can't make any promises, but perhaps we could check the records, or..."

Koshun gave Eisei an instructive look. He bowed his head respectfully, albeit in a somewhat disgruntled manner, upon hearing this indirect request from Jusetu.

"I'm sure he will come back and see me," Jusetu then said.

"Oh," Koshun responded simply.

Jusetu looked closely at Koshun's face. She couldn't read any emotion on his expressionless face. *Didn't Onkei report anything back to him?* Jusetu wondered. *Did he decide not to tell him what Hyogetsu said because he didn't understand it, or did he really not hear it?*

Koshun began to speak. "Why would Ran Hyogetsu possess Elder Moonlight?"

Jusetu averted her gaze and reached for her cup of tea.

"I don't know either. Yet, it seems that he did have some motivation for coming to the inner palace. He probably possessed several people in Reki Province and then got them to bring over that pot with the souls sealed away inside..."

"He must have possessed the sea merchant who delivers goods to the inner palace—the one that brought over the items I gifted to the Eno Palace. He's based in that province. Over the past few months, he kept feeling like he wasn't entirely present, but he assumed it was because he was worn out."

That must have been when he was possessed by Hyogetsu's ghost. After that pot had been brought into the inner palace, Hyogetsu transferred himself into the court lady's body.

"...Why would he go to such lengths to enter the inner palace? What does he want?" Jusetu murmured.

Koshun stared at her. Jusetu noticed his gaze and looked up. "What?" she said.

"Nothing," Koshun said, then stood up. It looked like he was about to leave.

"Are you going to see Kajo?" Jusetu asked.

"No, it's just..." Koshun began evasively.

He searched around for something inside his breast pocket. He then took out something wrapped in a silk handkerchief and placed it on the table. He unwrapped it himself. Inside, there was an ivory comb

shaped like a bird—a bush warbler, it seemed—along with some ferocious waves.

“What’s this?” Jusetsu asked.

“I hear Kajo gave you a robe. I thought this might go well with it.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Just throw it away then,” he said, trying to walk away.

“Did Kajo teach you that line?” Jusetsu asked.

Koshun left the palace without answering her.

There was no getting away anymore. She *knew* she should have refused that robe.

When you accepted things, you also accepted the emotional connections that came with them. Jusetsu was inevitably going to visit the Eno Palace now that Kajo had invited her. Even when Koshun came by these days, she found herself unable to force him out like she did when they first met.

Jusetsu bit her lip. She went over to the cabinet and took out a jet-black box. She opened the lid. There was an amber fish inside—the very one that Koshun gave to her. Jusetsu stared at it with a frown on her face and closed the box again. She then put it away in the cabinet, along with the comb that he had wrapped up and given to her.

Should I just give it to Jiujiu one of these days? she thought. *Or would that just create yet another connection?*

Jusetsu didn’t know what to do. How could she go back to being alone again?

She wanted to toss aside her feelings, rising above them, and live a discreet, lonesome life in the night.

“Sei,” Koshun quietly called out as they walked down the passageway, “tomorrow afternoon, call the Winter Minister to the Koto Institute.”

“The Winter Minister?” Eisei said hesitantly. “Are you sure, master?”

The Winter Minister was the palace’s officer that governed worship. He lived in an old, deserted-looking palace in the southern

part of the imperial estate.

“The current Winter Minister is Setsu Gyoei, isn’t it?”

“It has been Sir Setsu for a long time now. Since the Winter Minister is such an unimportant post, nobody is eager to take it on, so the same person has been in place for many, many years. We haven’t heard any complaints about that either.”

“I see. Inform him that I want to ask him something about the Raven Consort.”

“What?!”

Eisei humbly accepted this request, but was unable to hide the baffled look in his eyes.



*The Skylark
Princess*



SHE COULD HEAR the cry of a bird—but it wasn't Shinshin's.

Several skylarks perched on the grilled windows of the palace. They were pecking at the millet that Jusetu had put outside. It was one of these birds that was singing.

"It looks like I have some new visitors."

As Jusetu was murmuring this, Shinshin flew over to the new birds and chirped. Then the skylark also let out some kind of high-pitched call. After that, Shinshin flapped its wings about to intimidate the skylarks, so the birds flew away from the window and dashed around the palace, trying to get away.

"Don't bully the small birds, Shinshin," Jusetu said, but Shinshin wouldn't listen.

She extended her hand toward the skylarks as Shinshin fluttered about, scattering its feathers on the ground. One skylark perched on her fingers, and she sensed a vague chill run through them.

"What are you hesitating for, little bird?" she asked it. "Why don't you just cross over to paradise?"

This skylark wasn't like the others; it was why Shinshin was acting unruly. This bird's real body had long since gone cold. It was rare to come across the ghost of a bird.

Birds were Uren Niangniang's helpers, so when they died, they were ushered into the paradise beyond the sea. They almost never got lost and became ghosts—on the contrary, they often led the way for people's souls to follow.

"Don't you know you're dead?"

The skylark left Jusetu's hand and fluttered its way upward, almost reaching the ceiling.

After passing Jusetu some tea, Jiujiu also noticed the chirping sounds. "Oh my gosh! Skylarks!" she said happily. "This is such a quiet palace that it'd be lovely to have some birdsong to brighten the mood."

"That's no living skylark," Jusetu explained.

"What?" said Jiujiu, going noticeably pale. The young woman was as much of a coward as ever.

"For some reason, it missed its chance to get to paradise."

“Oh... I guess that kind of thing must happen from time to time. Oh! Then why don't we...” Jiujiu looked up at the bird above her head. Her voice had trailed off like she'd just had a realization. “Perhaps it's the Skylark Princess' skylark?” she suggested.

“The Skylark Princess?”

“There used to be a princess with that name during the reign of the last emperor.”

This meant she was the current emperor's half-sister.

“Why was she called the Skylark Princess?” Jusetu asked.

“There was a skylark who was a great friend to her. She...” The smile faded from Jiujiu's face as she recalled the story. “She was a lonely person, apparently. She lost her mother when she was very young, and nobody in the inner palace ever cared for her while she was growing up.”

“She was a princess, though, wasn't she?”

“Yes. But, well...her mother was only a court lady.”

With a mere lowly court lady as her mother, she would have had no one to support her. In this inner palace, having no backing meant being abandoned and unaided.

“The Mandarin Duck Consort, the Magpie Consort, the Crane Consort, the Swallow Concubine, and the warbler ladies... All of the concubines in the inner palace are given names like that, apart from the court ladies. Some of the concubines, however, call the court ladies by one name—‘sparrows.’”

“Sparrows? How sweet,” said Jusetu, but Jiujiu still looked stern—giving Jusetu the impression that the court ladies weren't fond of this nickname.

“They say we're ugly birds, flitting about and gladly pecking up any grains that fall onto the ground...”

“You're not ugly. One's words say a lot about who they are—which makes *them* the ugly ones deep down, for only be able to think in such a cruel way.”

At long last, Jiujiu grinned. “You are so kind, niangniang.”

“I'm not...”

That was unbefitting of me to say, Jusetu thought, holding her

tongue. It had just slipped out because Jiujiu was looking so sad.

“It’d be nice if everyone in the inner palace was like you and Hua niangniang, but...as I said before, the princess’ mother was a court lady—so they also called her the ‘Skylark Princess’ to make fun of that.”

The second of the two characters used to write “skylark” meant “sparrow,” hence the name.

She was ridiculed, nobody cared for her, and her only friend was a literal skylark. An image of this young girl popped into Jusetsu’s head. It was so upsetting that Jusetsu couldn’t help but frown.

“Everything you’ve been telling me has been about her past... What happened to her after that?”

“She passed away at the age of thirteen. She must have slipped and fallen into the pond because when they found her, she wasn’t breathing. The strange thing was that around the time that she fell, her skylark started chirping loudly and flying around in the air. It was like it was frantically trying to tell people that the princess was in serious trouble. That didn’t occur to anybody, though, and they just pretended not to notice. In the end, the skylark exhausted itself, fell onto the ground, and died. Ever since then, you can hear the sad cry of a skylark in the inner palace from time to time...”

Jusetsu and Jiujiu looked up above them. The skylark was still letting out a high-pitched cry, flying around restlessly. Then it appeared to fly into the wall and vanished.

“...Seems like it’s gone somewhere else.”

“Would you be able to send a bird as small as that over to paradise, niangniang?”

“It’s a bird, so...I imagine it should be possible.”

After all, birds were all family to the goddess, so even if all Jusetsu did was set it on the right course, Uren Niangniang should have been able to help with the rest. When she told Jiujiu this, her lady-in-waiting gave her a pleading look.

“*Please* try to save it, then. It’d be cruel to leave it like that.” As Jiujiu was a court lady herself, she must have been able to empathize strongly with the Skylark Princess and her skylark friend.

“Well, I suppose don’t mind trying...”

“Oh! If I’m going to make a request, I’ll have to give you something in exchange, won’t I? What should I give you? I don’t have anything to pay you with...”

“It’s all right. It’s just a bird.”

“Really?” Jiujiu asked, looking obviously surprised. This girl was easy to read.

“There aren’t any rumors that the Skylark Princess herself ended up as a ghost, are there?”

“I haven’t heard any—but it would be strange if it was only her *bird* that was still lost in this world and not the princess herself, wouldn’t it? So maybe there might be rumors going around that I just haven’t heard.”

“It wouldn’t be strange, per se. The more you want to see someone—even if they’re just a ghost—the less likely they are to have actually become one.”

“Huh! So that’s how it works...” said Jiujiu. She didn’t look like she *really* understood, but she nodded along anyway.

After midday, Jusetsu left the Yamei Palace, dressed as a court lady. The way Jusetsu saw things, it’d cause problems if she and Jiujiu made a habit of doing things together.

It’s freeing to be by myself, she thought as she walked down the white gravel path. The Skylark Princess used to live in a small palace called the Soro Palace on the northeastern outskirts of the inner palace. It stood beside a forest with a pond, and its surroundings were overgrown with honeysuckle flowers and chrysanthemums. There was nobody living there anymore, which apparently made it a convenient home for raccoon dogs and weasels. The hinges had rusted off its doors, and there were no furnishings of any sort—although it was unclear whether that has always been the case or if they were removed after the Skylark Princess’ death. As Jusetsu walked around the room, critters started fleeing from gaps in the ceiling and from the dilapidated clay walls, looking startled. There was not so much as a single sign of the Skylark Princess’ ghost. Jusetsu tried going over to the pond she’d fallen into, but it didn’t seem like she was there either. Just as Jusetsu expected, it seemed like she hadn’t turned into a ghost at all, and had safely crossed over to paradise.

The pond, which was surrounded by a forest of juniper and bay

trees, was gloomy and damp. It had threeleaf arrowhead plants, irises, and crown imperial plants growing on its banks. It didn't look like a pond that was created by draining water from a waterway, but instead one where the water had gushed up out of the ground to form it. There was no wind here, but there were still ripples gliding across its surface, and the water was so clear that it was almost colorless. It looked like it would be cold, even in the summer. If you fell in, you'd start losing all your body heat to the chilly water—and then your strength would go right along with it.

As Jusetu walked along the bank of the pond, she suddenly stopped in her tracks. There, lying in front of her, were some flowers that somebody had picked and left behind. They were white beach roses—the same variety that she spotted in the garden of the Soro Palace a few moments earlier. The flowers were still just buds, but several shoots had been cut off and tied together with a stem. These flowers clearly hadn't just been snapped off and thrown aside. Someone had *deliberately* placed them here—as an offering.

Jusetu gazed at the flowers for a little while, grumbled to herself, then turned back around. She looked for the closest building to the Soro Palace. One that appeared to be nearby had crane decorations on the corners of its blue glazed tile roof—the Hakkaku Palace.

Jusetu went around the juniper hedge that surrounded the building and peeked inside through its small back gate. Just a few steps away, some court ladies were hanging up clothes they had washed. The women must have been the palace textile dyers. Jusetu quietly walked up to them.

“Could you spare a minute to help me with something?”

“Oh! You surprised me!” One of the court ladies was holding a robe and jumped when Jusetu began speaking to her.

“What is it? Who are you? You're not one of us.”

“I'm from the Yamei Palace,” said Jusetu. “There's something I want to ask you about the Skylark Princess.”

Upon hearing the words “Yamei Palace” and “Skylark Princess,” the court lady looked around, perplexed. The other court ladies bustled over to join them, talking among themselves.

“Did she say the Yamei Palace? Where the Raven Consort lives?”

“What does *she* want?”

“The Skylark Princess? Wasn’t that the previous emperor’s... well...”

Jusetsu cleared her throat, which made them all go quiet. “The Soro Palace is nearby. Was anybody here close to her?”

The court ladies exchanged glances with their heads cocked in thought.

“Well, it might be close, but...”

“I mean, it all happened when the previous emperor was still in power.”

“We only know the same rumors everybody else does.”

Then, another one of the court ladies raised her voice. “Oh, but I’m sure I heard that the previous Crane Consort used to have food sent over to the Soro Palace from time to time.”

The previous Crane Consort—in other words, Consort Sha, Koshun’s mother.

“At one point, she didn’t even have food to eat. The empress dowager would have targeted the Crane Consort if she was overly kind to her, so it sounds like she helped her out in secret. The court lady who used to deliver her food is still in this palace, actually. She’s the current Crane Consort’s lady-in-waiting.”

“What’s her name?”

“Lady Yo.”

“Understood.”

Jusetsu thanked the court ladies, but when she went to walk over to the palace building itself, they stopped her.

“If it’s her that you’re going to see, now is not a good time. The Crane Consort is choosing the fabric for her new ruqun at the moment. Her room is packed full of different textiles... One minute she’s deliberating which would match which hairpin, and the next, she’s discussing what would go well with her shoes—and getting them to bring all these different fabrics over to her one after another. It’s *chaos* in there! I suspect it might take up the entire day.”

“The whole day, just choosing fabrics?”

The court lady raised her eyebrows but didn't challenge her—she just shrugged her shoulders. She must have found this just as absurd as Juseitsu did.

"The fabrics that the Crane Consort doesn't choose get handed down to her ladies-in-waiting, so it's fun for them too. You can call for the lady-in-waiting you want to speak to, but she probably still won't come out. There's a chance she may be able to get her hands on an unwanted hairpin or ruqun, after all."

"The Crane Consort sounds like a generous person."

"Her ladies seemed pleased with it. They say there are more perks to working for her than other consorts."

"Perks?" Juseitsu repeated.

"Some consorts don't give out any hand-me-downs at all. A consort's backing *does* play a big role, doesn't it? The Crane Consort comes from a rich family."

The court lady said this as if Juseitsu already knew.

"Is it normal for every consort to bestow gifts upon their ladies-in-waiting...?"

"It's not the case at *all* palaces—it depends on how generous the consort is. But it is the norm."

"The norm..."

Juseitsu had never given anything to her lady-in-waiting Jiujiu—and naturally, she hadn't given anything to Kogyo either. Reijo didn't have a lady-in-waiting, so she had no way of knowing how these things worked.

So this is what happens.

Since she wasn't going to get the opportunity to see the Crane Consort's lady-in-waiting that day, she pensively made her way back to the Yamei Palace. The building was positioned deep inside the inner palace grounds—or, more accurately, right in the heart of it. You had to go through a dense forest of bay trees and rhododendrons to get to it, but the fact that the poisonous rhododendrons appeared to be warding off any potential visitors made it very obvious that this was the Raven Consort's abode. Despite being surrounded by all those plants, the palace didn't have a garden where one could appreciate any seasonal flowers. It was unusual in that regard, considering even the Soro Palace

had thriving flowering plants in its garden—and that was abandoned.

When Jusetu got back, Jiujiu was just as furious as one would expect.

“Didn’t I tell you that I would accompany you if you were going out? Why would you go out by yourself?” she said in a huff.

“I don’t necessarily require you to accompany me *every* time,” Jusetu replied.

“If your lady-in-waiting doesn’t even accompany on your outings, what else is she supposed to do? Are you saying you don’t need me?”

“That’s not...” Jusetu’s voice went quiet. *That’s right.* Jusetu never needed a court lady in the first place. She actually preferred *not* having one. All she’d have to do was tell Koshun as such and he would get her assigned to another consort or give her back her old job as a court lady.

Jusetu almost wanted to ask, “Wouldn’t you prefer to work as another consort’s lady-in-waiting?” Instead, she stopped herself and went over to the cabinet.

She took out the item that was wrapped in a hand cloth and gave it to Jusetu. “Have this.”

“Huh?” Jiujiu said, blinking in surprise. “Where did this come from, all of a sudden?”

Jusetu silently forced the bundle into Jiujiu’s hand. The young woman opened it up. It was the ivory comb that Koshun had given to Jusetu.

“Didn’t His Majesty grant you this?” Jiujiu said, hurriedly wrapping it back up with a startled look on her face. “No. You can’t give this to me!”

“I told you to take it. I don’t believe there’s any issue.”

“It’s a *big* issue! You can’t give away something that His Majesty so kindly...”

“Would you prefer my robe instead?”

For some reason, this suggestion made Jiujiu look offended. “I never said I wanted anything,” she said.

“But it’d still be nice to get something, wouldn’t it?”

The conversation that Jusetu had with the court ladies earlier that day was still in the forefront of her mind, but Jiujiu's mouth fell open in dismay.

"I have no desire to take anything from you, niangniang. Do I look like I'm that greedy?"

"No, it's not that..."

"I only became your lady-in-waiting under your command in the first place, but I'm still serving you faithfully and to the best of my ability. And yet you're treating me like I'm some kind of gold digger... It's too much."

Jiujiu shoved the bundled-up comb back into Jusetu's hands and ran out of the room, through the entrance to the kitchen area. Kogyo peered through the doorway, looking concerned. Jusetu stood holding the comb, unsure what to do. It seemed like she'd made her angry.

Jusetu gazed at the comb in her hand, then put it back in the cabinet. She opened up her fine silk curtains and sat down on her bed.

She didn't really care if she offended Jiujiu. She had been entertaining the idea of having her transferred to some other palace just moments earlier, anyway.

Jusetu thought to herself in silence. If that was really what she wanted, why had she tried to give Jiujiu that comb? It was as if she was trying to butter her up because she was mad.

Jusetu clasped her arms around her knees and closed her eyes.

Jusetu spent that afternoon doing some wood carving. She fetched some firewood from the pile at the back of the kitchen and began silently carving into it with a knife. She found herself unable to carve it in the way she wanted to. Jusetu was not a skilled craftswoman in the least. Eventually, she abandoned the halfheartedly carved wood in a fit of frustration and went to lie down in bed. Wood chips were scattered about on top of the flower-patterned carpets on the floor. Shinshin seemed annoyed as it pecked at them with its beak to clear them from its path. The room was excessively messy. At that moment, however, Shinshin looked toward the doors and started flapping its wings about in agitation.

Jusetu let out a sigh and, while still lying down, lazily waved a

hand. The doors opened, and in came Koshun.

“What are all these wood chips for?” he said. He made no effort to dodge them and stepped on them as he walked over to Jusetsu.

Eisei stared at the floor, frowning. It didn’t seem like he was too impressed by the mess Jusetsu had made.

Jusetsu, lacking the motivation to sit up, just turned her head to face them.

“Aren’t you going to get mad at me today?”

Koshun opened the curtains, came in, and boldly sat himself down on the bed. Usually, this would have made Jusetsu furious, and she would have yelled something like, “Who do you think you are, coming in through the curtains without permission?” or “Don’t you dare sit on my bed!”

Today, however, things were different.

“Not feeling well?” he said.

“Shut up,” replied Jusetsu.

“What’s going on? Do those wood shavings have something to do with this?”

Jusetsu looked up. Koshun was holding a half-carved piece of wood.

“I had no idea that you were such an accomplished wood carver,” he went on. “Is this...a fat lizard?”

“No,” Jusetsu angrily snapped back. She then stood up. “It’s a bird.”

Koshun stared closely at the piece of wood, then looked at Jusetsu with a hint of pity on his otherwise blank face. “Something is letting you down here, either your observational or your practical skills. Or maybe it’s both?”

“Be quiet.” A wood chip was stuck to Jusetsu’s skirt; she threw it at Koshun. He then picked up the knife that she had chucked onto the mattress.

“There’s not just one kind of bird, you see. Which type were you trying to carve?”

“It didn’t matter as long as it resembled a bird of some sort.”

“Well, that’s why it ended up like this,” Koshun quipped, aghast. “You could have at least used Shinshin as a reference.”

“Shinshin doesn’t fly very well,” Jusetsu replied sulkily.

Shinshin flapped its wings about in protest, but she ignored it.

“So you’d prefer a bird that was better at flying?” said Koshun.

“It needs to be good enough to cross the sea, at least.”

Upon hearing this answer, Koshun silently nodded and started working the knife. “A bank swallow should do the job then. They’re fantastic in the air.”

Bank swallows were a type of swallow that flew over to the land of Sho in the summer and dug holes along the shoreline to build their nests. They even came to the imperial estate and nested underneath the roof tiles or in the hollows of trees. This was a bird that was capable of crossing the sea, thus making them the perfect choice.

Koshun chiseled away at the wood at a remarkable speed, scrutinizing it from every angle as he did so. In no time at all, he had transformed the previously distorted figure into something that definitely resembled a bird. Jusetsu was understandably shocked by his degree of skill.

“It’s a bird,” she said.

“It’s a bank swallow,” Koshun corrected her.

“It looks very good. I suppose woodwork really is your specialty.”

“It’s not finished yet,” said Koshun as he added some small touches to its beak and wings. “Besides, it’s not as if I was born with this skill. It was something I was taught.”

“I remember you telling me something along those lines.”

“My friend taught me how to do it, when I was a child.”

“A friend...?”

“My friend Teiran,” Koshun clarified. “He was close to my father’s age, but I used to play with him.”

Jusetsu examined his facial expression. Kajo had told her not to mention that name in front of him because, according to her, it would just open old wounds.

Koshun didn’t go into any further detail. He just silently went

about carving the image of the swallow. Jusetsu fell quiet too and watched the swallow's feathers being carved into the wood.

"...There's something I'd like to hear your opinion on," Jusetsu said as she gazed at Koshun's hands.

"What is it?" he asked, not stopping work for a single second.

"Do you ever give items to people? Eisei, for example?"

"Items? Well, I have given him a sword."

"Did he get angry?"

Koshun stopped and looked at Jusetsu.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I'm pretty sure he was pleased with it," he commented. He then called out to Eisei, who was standing on the other side of the curtain.

"You were pleased, weren't you?"

"Yes," Eisei replied politely. "I will treasure that sword for the rest of my life."

He gave Jusetsu a look as if to say, "*See?*"

Now feeling even more confused, Jusetsu put her arms around her knees. "Jiujiu...got angry at me."

"Did she?" Koshun said.

The expression on his face changed. This was a rare occurrence. Looking surprised, his eyes widened.

"I tried to give her that ivory comb, but she got mad at me."

"Didn't I give you that?"

"You told me to throw it away if I didn't need it, didn't you? That would have been a waste, so I thought I'd give it to Jiujiu instead."

Koshun, looking both dismayed and resigned at the same time, shut his mouth. Jusetsu explained what had gone on between her and Jiujiu earlier. As she did so, Koshun silently continued carving out the swallow. She couldn't tell whether he was listening or not, but once she was finished, he stopped and began to speak.

"You shouldn't take customs you only have a superficial knowledge of so seriously—nor should you go through with things you don't properly understand. If you don't know why you're doing something in the first place, how are you supposed to know why it

makes someone angry? Some ladies might devote themselves to their work in the hopes of receiving gifts in exchange, but many others do not. This just means that Jiujiu is one of the latter.”

Koshun snuck a glance at Jusetsu.

“You may be an intelligent and good-natured girl, but I have to admit that your worldly wisdom leaves something to be desired. Don’t be a boring copycat.”

Koshun was telling her she was clueless in this situation was bad enough, but his tone of voice sounded unusually mean. It stung.

Jusetsu frowned at him in annoyance. “What do you mean, boring?”

“You’re ignorant toward the emotional subtleties of the people around you, aren’t you? I’m sure that would offend her too.”

Jusetsu went quiet and watched the way the emperor was acting intently. “...Are you angry about something? How come?”

Koshun’s hand froze, and he looked over at Jusetsu.

“What kind of person gives a *present* to someone else, just because they feel like it?” he retorted in a somewhat rude manner, catching Jusetsu off guard.

“But...you said I could just throw it away.”

“Yes, but I didn’t tell you that you could give it to somebody else! If you have such little desire to keep it, just toss it.”

“Is this really something you should be getting upset about?” Jusetsu replied. “I doubt you put that much thought into that gift.”

This time, Koshun was at a loss for words. Even *Jusetsu* could tell whether something was a deeply thoughtful gift or not. The comb wasn’t the kind of thing you’d lovingly gift to someone you cherished.

“Well... I can’t deny that.” Koshun sounded less derisive now. Perhaps Jusetsu hit the nail on the head. “But it wasn’t a gift that I didn’t care about either. I thought it would suit you.”

“You’ve offered it to the wrong person. Give it to a different consort.”

Koshun put down the knife and stood up with the carved wood still in his hand. “All right,” he said, “I won’t give you any more accessories of any kind. But...” He put his free hand in his breast pocket

and brought out a brocade bag. “Does that mean you don’t want this either?”

Koshun held up the bag in front of Jusetsu’s eyes. *It’s probably some dried apricots or jujube*, she thought.

“It’s sipaotang,” he said.

“What?!” Jusetsu found herself saying, a bit too loudly. Sipaotang was a sweet made of a bundle of thin strips of candy. The inside of each was hollow, so it had a crispy and light texture and instantly melted on the tongue. It was *very* sweet—fruit and other kinds of confectionaries didn’t even come close.

“Don’t you want it?” Koshun repeated.

Jusetsu gulped and hesitated, but eventually managed to force some words out. “...I accept.”

She had lost this battle.

Koshun placed the bag in Jusetsu’s hand. It was frustrating to her that food had tempted her so, but she was too mesmerized by what was inside of the bag to fight it.

“If you *do* want to give Jiujiu something, how about you give her some food? If you’re anything to go by, I doubt it’d make her angry.”

“Can I give her this, then?” Jusetsu asked.

Koshun blinked a little, perhaps surprised by her question. Then his expression softened. “If you like,” he said.

This might cheer Jiujiu up, Jusetsu thought. Now, she felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

“Jusetsu,” said Koshun.

As soon as he called her name, she looked up. He was looking down at her.

“What happened to that amber fish? Did you throw it out? You didn’t give it to anybody, did you?”

“No, it’s...” Jusetsu said, glancing over at the kitchen cabinet. “It’s put away.”

“Okay.” Koshun let out a small sigh, appearing relieved. “If there’s one thing that you *don’t* give away, make sure it’s that.”

His voice sounded somewhat pained, which made Jusetsu frown.

“Don’t tell me that you made it, did you?”

“No. It was made by...Teiran.” Koshun looked into the distance.

Jusetsu was stunned. She then stood up. “I can’t keep something like that. I’m giving it back,” she said.

This was an item that Koshun’s deceased friend had made. It must have been very special to him. It wasn’t right for Jusetsu to have it.

“It’s proof of my promise to you. There’s no need for you to return it. As long as you keep it safe, that’s good enough for me.”

“But...couldn’t you have entrusted something else to me instead? Why would you give me something like that?”

Koshun went quiet for a moment, then looked at Jusetsu in the eyes. “I don’t know,” he said quietly, and turned away. With his back toward Jusetsu, he held up the carved wood. “I’ll finish this before I see you next.”

Then he went through the curtains and left.

When the door shut behind him, Jusetsu perched herself on the bed and opened the bag that Koshun had given her. The contents smelled sweet.

Jusetsu didn’t even bother taking the sweets out, but simply sat there, gazing at them.

Once the imperial council meeting was over, Koshun didn’t go to the inner court, where the Gyoko Palace was located. Instead, he headed for the southern part of the imperial estate. Away from a line of important government offices—including those of the imperial secretariat and the department of the palace—there was a shrine tucked quietly behind a roofed mud wall. Pieces were falling off it in places and the framed plaque hanging above the gate—which had red paint peeling off it—was tilted slightly to one side. Once he was in front of it, Koshun got out of his litter. No matter whether you were the emperor or anyone else, it was customary to dismount your horse or step out of your litter there.

Koshun looked up at the framed plaque. There, it had “Seiu Shrine” written on it.

This shrine was dedicated to Uren Niangniang, and it was also

where the Winter Minister, also known as the minister of worship, carried out his work. When Koshun passed through the gate, he found cobblestones leading the way to the shrine itself, but they were all cracked and chipped. The copper lantern tower standing at the side was obscured by blue rust, and the three large incense burners in front of the shrine were dark and still. Originally, the incense was to be lit and used to perfume clothes until it smoldered.

The shrine was noticeably moth-eaten, with its paint peeling off in places. Many of the paper lanterns hanging from the eaves had been broken and sported repair patches. The streamers had also been mended at some point, but they were still severely damaged. Inside, the shrine looked bare and desolate, making the image of Uren Niangniang on the wall in front of him stand out like a hideous specter in the faint sunlight. The altar had been wiped clean, but it was impossible to hide its old, peeling lacquer.

The staff from the Winter Ministry were out in full force waiting for the emperor's visit—although there were only eleven of them in the first place. They were dressed in robes as dark gray as a cloudy sky, but one old man in the front was wearing an even darker, gray-black robe—the Winter Minister himself. Gray robes were the symbol of Uren Niangniang's manservants. The old man tried to bow to Koshun, but perhaps because of his age, he ended up wobbling to his knees instead. Koshun asked him to lift his head, and two young men in dark gray robes who were behind him supported the old man as he struggled to get back to his feet. They were the Winter Minister's subordinates.

"I am the Winter Minister, Setsu Gyoei," the old man said. He introduced himself in a steadier voice than one would expect from his outward appearance.

"I hear that you were bedridden with illness for a while," the emperor said. "Are you all right now?"

"I'm very grateful for your concern, Your Majesty. As you can see, I am an old man, so I ought to avoid becoming so sickly. However, I do seem to be doing much better these past few days."

Koshun proceeded to enter the shrine and sat down on a taboret next to the lattice window. Eisei stood in wait by his side.

"I heard that you sent a messenger for me. I do apologize for all the trouble you had to go through. Not only that, but it is truly an honor to have you here, Your Majesty. As I'm sure you have noticed,

this shrine has seen better days. It pains me to say it, but this is something that we simply lack the budget to repair... My apologies for the eyesore.”

Gyoei’s tone sounded polite, but there was a touch of wit to it too. Wondering whether he was underestimating him because of his age, Koshun examined the look on the old man’s face.

“Anyway, what did you require of me?” Gyoei continued.

Koshun squinted in the sunlight that was coming in through the lattice window and gazed over at the mural of Uren Niangniang. “I’d like to ask you about the Raven Consort,” he said.

“My goodness. In what sense...?” Gyoei blinked in surprise, his eyes obscured by his long, white eyebrows. Koshun noted that those eyes were unexpectedly piercing.

“The Raven Consort was confined to the inner palace so that an emperor from the previous dynasty could monopolize her power,” began the emperor. “At least, that’s what was recorded in the *Divine Communicator Log*. There is no mention of it in the *Duo Encyclopedia of History*, however, even though that is the *official* account of things. I believe it was the Winter Minister from the previous dynasty who penned the *Divine Communicator Log*, so I thought that the person who held that position may know more about her.”

Gyoei stroked his beard in contemplation. “I am sure that everything is as stipulated by law. I work for Uren Niangniang—not for the Raven Consort.”

Koshun glanced toward Gyoei. *What a difficult old man*, he thought to himself.

“The law only tells us how we should *treat* her. I want to know about the Raven Consort herself. I always found the situation a little mysterious. My grandfather—the emperor before last—despised incantation, so much so that he expelled all shamans from the imperial capital. So why, then, would he let the Raven Consort, someone who possessed the same sorts of mystical powers, stay?”

That faint feeling that something didn’t add up had been growing inside of him for a while now. The report that Onkei gave to him and Hyogetsu’s words had only made matters worse.

“*Why are you content with shutting yourself away in the inner palace?*

If you so wanted, you could have it all."

Gyoei swept his hand over his beard with a solemn look on his face. "...The Flame Emperor only loathed shamans because the emperor from the previous dynasty appointed them to such important positions. The Flame Emperor viewed all kinds of curses with contempt. But, then, a ghost appeared."

"What?"

"The ghosts of the previous dynasty's emperor and the imperial family began appearing in his bedchamber. The Flame Emperor was so troubled by this that he eventually turned to the Raven Consort for help and asked her to do something about it."

"...Are you sure that was not just a rumor?" Koshun had assumed this story to be petty nonsense.

"It's the truth," Gyoei assured him. "The Raven Consort exorcized their ghosts. After that, the Flame Emperor was finally able to sleep at night, and he could no longer bring himself to treat her harshly. That's what happened."

Koshun crossed his arms. "I hear you. Do you know anything else?"

"Let me think..." replied Gyoei, stroking his beard. "I'm merely the Winter Minister for this desolate old shrine, so I'm far from a fountain of knowledge."

"Fine. I will tell the high official from the financial affairs department to send you the expenses for those repairs."

Gyoei raised his eyebrows. With his wide, narrow eyes, he looked as though he may have been a very handsome young man.

"Your Majesty, I was not withholding any knowledge in an attempt to bargain with you in such a way. I'm offended that you would even *think* such a thing. If this shrine loses its popularity and people's faith drifts from Uren Niangniang, then that is just the direction that the world is moving in. And so be it."

Koshun had been informed that shrines to Uren Niangniang were becoming deserted, and not just in the imperial capital—it was the same in every corner of the land. There hadn't been much for the Winter Ministry to do in a long time, and the situation in the countryside was unlikely to be any different.

“People say that the Raven Consort was once Uren Niangniang’s shrine maiden,” said Koshun.

“Indeed, she was.”

“With the shrine maiden shut away in the inner palace, there is nothing left for the priests to do.”

Gyoei’s moustache twitched. It looked like he was laughing. “That doesn’t bother me, Your Majesty.”

Koshun drew closer to Gyoei’s face, and, in a voice quiet enough for other people not to hear it, whispered, “...Even though the Raven Consort could have it all, if she just so wished?”

Gyoei’s “miserable old man” facade slipped from his face. His eyes opened wide. He was at a loss for words. “Where did you hear that?”

“There are still some things that I find peculiar. The Yamei Palace, where the Raven Consort lives, is right opposite my Gyoko Palace. Why is that?”

The characters used to write “Yamei” implied that it was a palace that would glow brightly, even during the night—whereas the name “Gyoko” signified exquisite lighting. The Yamei Palace was situated right in the heart of the inner palace, almost as if it were its focal point.

“Who is the Raven Consort?”

“You sly old fool...” Koshun cursed silently as he swayed back and forth inside his litter.

“You are saying some strange things. I’m sure that the Raven Consort is exactly who she proclaims to be—the Raven Consort.”

Gyoei had soon gone back to how he had been acting before, being evasive with the emperor and saying things with no substance.

“I have no links with the inner palace myself, so unfortunately, I do not know anything about her. Why don’t you pose these questions to the Raven Consort herself? Oh yes, I also hear that she has the ability to purge evil spirits that interfere with your sleep. Have you been having trouble on that front, by any chance? Why not request her assistance? You don’t look too well, I must say.”

Despite insisting that he didn’t know much about the Raven Consort, he did seem to know a few curious things. Koshun rubbed his

brow. It was true that he'd been struggling to sleep lately. Did he really look that unwell? Eisei was sure to start worrying about him now.

Koshun sighed and opened the curtains slightly.

"Sei—change of plan," he said. "Forget about the Gyoko Palace. Let's head to the inner palace."

"Understood," said Eisei.

Jusetsu paced along the edge of the pond. This was the place where the Skylark Princess had drowned. As she was walking, checking the flowers that were growing at the water's edge as she went, she heard a skylark chirping. It was definitely *that* skylark. She looked around, wondering where it was, but couldn't spot it.

Due to the shadows of the trees, the pond's surface was gloomy, even in the late afternoon. Jusetsu, who'd somehow found herself gazing at the sunlight shimmering faintly on the ripples in the water, suddenly looked up. She could hear footsteps approaching, accompanied by the swishing of a robe. She waited, and a court lady—who looked to be in her thirties—appeared from underneath a bay tree. From the way she was dressed, it seemed like she was a lady-in-waiting for one of the concubines. She held a beach rose stalk to her chest. She was a pale and delicate-looking woman. Her facial features were not exceptionally beautiful, but her slender figure and long neck had a certain allure to them. Her single-lidded, downcast eyes also had a gloomy tinge to them that would attract people's attention.

The lady-in-waiting saw Jusetsu standing beside the pond and stopped in her tracks, looking genuinely surprised, and she dropped what she was holding. It didn't seem like she was expecting to find anybody there. She hurriedly picked up the flower that had fallen to the ground.

"Are you offering that flower in tribute?" Jusetsu asked.

"What?" asked the lady-in-waiting.

"That flower. I assume it's an offering for the Skylark Princess, isn't it?"

The lady-in-waiting looked at Jusetsu, perplexed. "Uhh, well, I suppose so..." she admitted ambiguously.

The lady-in-waiting appeared wary of the unknown stranger who

was speaking to her.

“I’m the Raven Consort,” said Juseitsu. “Who are you?”

“The Raven Consort?” the woman repeated, looking increasingly confused. Maybe she didn’t believe what Juseitsu was saying, because she was at a total loss.

“You must be Lady Yo, the Crane Consort’s lady-in-waiting.”

“You...know who I am?” The lady-in-waiting got down on her knees in apparent awe. “You’re correct—my family name is Yo. My given name is Jujo. Thank you for your trouble.”

It sounded like Jujo assumed that Juseitsu had used some kind of mystical powers to guess her name, but in reality, the court ladies had just told her that this was the only lady-in-waiting that would have come to offer the Skylark Princess flowers. Juseitsu was just putting two and two together that this indeed was Lady Yo, whose family name was written with the character for “sheep.”

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

“For me...?”

Juseitsu had found out that there was someone mourning the Skylark Princess’ death the day before when she’d found a flower that someone had left as an offering next to the pond. She was sure that she’d get the chance to see them as long as she waited in that spot.

“I want to know about the princess,” Juseitsu said. “I hear that you took her meals from time to time. Were you close?”

“We...” Jujo went to answer her but was then taken by a small coughing fit. “My apologies,” she said.

“Are you ill?” Juseitsu asked.

“No, I wouldn’t go that far...” said Jujo. “I just tend to get a cough when the seasons change.”

It sounded like this was just something she was predisposed to. Perhaps she was physically feeble because she had such a thin body.

“Be careful. You’ll freeze at the water’s edge,” said Juseitsu, ushering Jujo away from the bank of the pond and into the shade of the trees.

“Thank you very much,” she replied. “The princess was a frail person too. It may have been because we had that in common, but she

was very considerate toward me—even though I’m certain she had it much harder than I did...”

“She was frail?”

“I don’t think it was bad enough for her to have to see the court physician, but she would occasionally end up bedridden with a fever. She always said she was able to sleep it off, so she never took any medicine... When she asked the medicinal department for some, they wouldn’t give her any. They can’t prescribe medicine without permission, and you needed Her Majesty’s permission, meaning the empress dowager, to request the court physician, so there wasn’t that much that Consort Sha could do...”

If someone showed her too much kindness, it would’ve backfired, and they would end up drawing the empress dowager’s attention. That must have been what Consort Sha was afraid of.

“She didn’t have a lady-in-waiting, so she was capable of doing everything by herself. The first time I had the privilege of seeing her, she was twelve, the same age as me. I couldn’t imagine what it must have been like, being abandoned in such a lonely palace at such a young age...but she never blamed anybody, and just quietly carried on with her life. She was such a brave girl. I’d only just come to the inner palace, so I was missing my family. It was hard at times, but she comforted me greatly.”

A yearning smile came to Jujo’s face. “She was an innocent and naive girl, and doing her own kitchen and outdoor work didn’t bother her. She grew vegetables and flowers in her garden, and I sometimes lent her a hand too.”

“She tended to those by herself?”

“Yes. The flowers are still there to this day—the honeysuckles and beach roses. I cut this one from her garden. It was a flower that the Skylark Princess was fond of, after all.”

“I see,” Jusetu nodded.

Then, as if she had suddenly come back to her senses, Jujo said, “Umm... But why have you taken an interest in the Skylark Princess *now*, dear Raven Consort?”

“There was one skylark who really took to the princess, wasn’t there?”

“Oh, yes,” Jujo immediately replied, nodding.

She probably didn’t need to think back very far to remember this, as “skylark” was in the princess’ name.

“Are you aware that the skylark is still inside the inner palace?”

“Oh...” Jujo responded sadly, letting out a sigh. “I have heard that, but only in rumors. Were they true?”

“Yes. And I want to do something about it,” Jusetsu said.

Jujo nodded her head again and again to show her gratitude. “Thank you very much. If that is your aim, I will tell you everything I know, without holding anything back. If there’s anything you’d like to ask, please, you are welcome to.”

And so, Jusetsu decided to question her without reservation. “Was that skylark really that attached to the Skylark Princess?”

“The Skylark Princess used to feed it millet every day and really doted on it. I think she often had sparrows and skylarks visit her, but that one bird was particularly fond of her. Whenever it saw her, it would chirp with glee.”

“I heard that the bird died—when the Skylark Princess passed away.”

“Yes...” responded Jujo, seeming hesitant his time.

It didn’t look like she was unsure about her answer. This was probably just a painful memory to revisit. Jujo drooped her head.

“It was screeching in grief, but I hesitated. I didn’t hurry over to the Skylark Princess quickly enough. If I’d been there to save her right away, things might have been different...”

“The coldness of this pond would have been fatal to someone as weak as her. Even if you’d pulled her out of the water sooner, I’m sure it would have been difficult for you to save her.”

Jujo smiled slightly. “Thank you very much for saying that. But...”

“You said you hesitated... Why was that?”

“Well...” Jujo lowered her gaze and her face clouded over. “The previous day, the Skylark Princess and I had gotten into an argument.”

“What happened?”

"I didn't know my place and was impolite toward her. I felt so sorry for the situation she was in that I suggested that His Majesty—the previous emperor, I mean—might've been able to do something about it. The princess shook her head, insisted that she didn't want that, and assured me she was fine with the way things were. As brave as I thought she was, it was extremely frustrating... I mean, she hadn't done anything wrong—why did she have to be treated in such a way? I thought she should be more upset about it and express how she felt."

And yet, the princess had just shaken her head.

"The princess was too stubborn to listen to what I was saying, and in the end, I ended up getting angry...and that's how I left her."

A self-deprecating, bitter smile came to Jujo's face.

"I'm sure that even *I* saw her as less important because she was the daughter of a mere court lady. That's why I was able to speak to her like that. I finally realized that once I was back in my own room. It was a frightening thought. The princess was a clever girl, so I'm sure she must have realized I saw her that way too... I was so embarrassed that I couldn't bring myself to face her again."

That's why, when the skylark was crying out as if it was pleading for help, Jujo hesitated. Then, the princess died.

"It's troubled me for all this time. I let her die all alone. I wish I had at least been able to hold her hand. I wanted to tell her that I was by her side. When I think about how helpless and sorrowful she must've felt when she died, I..."

Choking up, Jujo covered her mouth with her sleeve. She coughed, so Jusetsu patted her on the back.

"I'm sorry. It'll be over in a minute."

"You should ask the medicinal department for a fritillaria concoction. It'll soothe your cough."

"I will... Thank you."

Jusetsu turned back toward the pond and gazed at it for a short while. "Do you have any idea why the princess fell into the pond?"

Jujo shook her head. "I don't. She sometimes took walks here, so I assume she just happened to slip."

"I see..."

Jujo looked at Jusetsu apprehensively. The Raven Consort was lost in thought. "Can you save that skylark?"

"I can," Jusetsu replied concisely and emphatically.

Jujo let out a sigh of admiration. "I really appreciate it. It doesn't seem like the skylark is the princess herself. Please help it."

With that, Jujo went home, and Jusetsu walked around the bank of the pond again.

The princess...

A gentle breeze caused ripples on the surface of the water. It sounded like flowing sand. She crouched by the water's edge, breathing in the damp smell. The flowers were blooming. The closer to the ground she was, the stronger the smell of rotting vegetation and soil became.

"There you are," somebody called out to her.

Jusetsu stood up. Koshun appeared from inside the forest, with Eisei behind him.

"We went to the Yamei Palace, but it turned out that you headed to the Soro Palace instead. We've been looking for you. Jiujiu was upset that you'd gone out on your own again."

"I don't like taking my lady-in-waiting with me on walks."

"If you don't need one, should I reassign her to the Hien Palace?"

"No..." Jusetsu said, finding herself turning to Koshun, then back toward the lake. "You don't have to do that."

Then Koshun walked up to her. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been doing some investigation into the Skylark Princess."

"Oh. I heard she had a skylark as a good friend." Koshun looked around the pond. "Come to think of it, this was the pond where she died."

She had been Koshun's half-sister.

"Did you ever meet her?" Jusetsu asked.

"No," Koshun responded succinctly.

"But she was your sister, wasn't she?"

"It would be different if we were blood-related, but half-siblings only get a glimpse of each other on ceremonial occasions. We weren't

close.”

Further still, since the Skylark Princess’ mother was a court lady, she had been cast into oblivion.

“What’s this flower for?” Koshun spotted the nearby beach rose stalk and picked it up.

“It’s an offering from a lady-in-waiting who knew the princess.”

“Right,” said Koshun, staring intently at it. “I didn’t realize there was anyone who would leave flower offerings for her.”

“It’s called a beach rose. Are you familiar with it?”

“Not particularly. I always forget the names of flowers, no matter how many times I hear them. I don’t think we even have any of these in the garden by the Gyoko Palace, though.”

“Apparently, she grew them in the garden herself. She had honeysuckles and chrysanthemums too.”

“Oh?” Koshun said with a questioning look in his eyes.

“They all have medicinal uses.”

Koshun let out another “oh” in response. This time, he sounded surprised.

“Honeysuckles are a fever medicine. Beach roses help your energy flow. Chrysanthemums have fever-reducing and sedative effects. I heard that the princess was weak and often got fevers, but they wouldn’t give her any medicine for it. She probably made her own concoctions using these plants.”

Juetsu didn’t know where the princess had acquired that knowledge, but supposed she may have learned it from her mother.

“And...” Juetsu looked toward the pond, “the reason she fell into the pond is right there.”

“What?” Koshun asked.

Juetsu pointed at the plant by their feet. Bell-shaped, greenish-white flowers with a black checkered pattern inside were coming into bloom.

“They’re fritillarias.”

“Fritillarias?”

“Their bulbs act as a cough medicine.”

“These are medicinal?” Koshun asked, getting down on one knee and gazing at the flowers.

Then, he looked around him and said, “That makes sense. She must have slipped when she was trying to pull one out.”

The area where the fritillarias were planted was sloped, and the dirt was soggy with water.

“She shouldn’t have struggled so hard to pick it,” Koshun whispered.

Jusetsu stayed quiet. The princess had been trying to pick the fritillaria for Yo Jujo. She was willing to push herself to pull it out because Jujo developed a cough whenever the seasons changed. She probably wanted to use them to make amends after their argument.

It would be almost impossible to tell Jujo this, and that was why Jusetsu had avoided telling her earlier. She was better off not knowing.

Jusetsu looked up. She could hear a skylark chirping from inside the forest. “What did you do with it?”

“With what?”

“The wood carving of the bird. You told me it’d be complete before your next visit.”

“The sand swallow? I finished it.”

He might have struggled to remember the names of flowers, but he definitely didn’t have the same problem when it came to animals. Koshun pulled the wood carving out of his breast pocket and gave it to Jusetsu.

“You did an excellent job...”

Jusetsu was overcome with emotion as gazed at the swallow ornament in her hand. It almost felt as if it were alive. Its delicately carved wings looked soft, and its beady eyes were adorable and full of life. When she stroked its plump chest area, she felt like she could almost feel its small heartbeat.

“Do you think you can use it? Not that I know what you wanted it for in the first place.”

“I can.”

Jusetsu whistled, mimicking the high-pitched cry of a bird. A few moments later, a bird came flying through the bay trees and perched on

a branch next to her.

It was the skylark.

She pulled a peony out of her hairdo, and it melted into a pale red mist on her palm. She blew across it and the mist turned into a small vortex, flipping up the sleeves of Jusetsu's robe. With a wave of her hand, the vortex dissipated and became more of a gentle breeze. She held up the wood carving of the swallow that she was holding in her other hand. The wood felt as if it was starting to tremble—and the next thing she knew, it transformed itself into a real swallow in one fluid motion.

"Be on your way," Jusetsu said to the bird.

With that, the bird launched itself up off her hand as if in answer to her plea. It flapped its wings and ascended into the sky.

"Now, you too must follow that bird on its path. The princess will be waiting for you at the end of your journey."

The skylark kicked off the branch and began to fly as well. The pale red breeze wrapped around its body. As if it were being supported by the wind, the skylark followed the swallow.

The swallow and the skylark rode the wind as they soared through the air, heading for the sea—and then beyond. Once both the red breeze and the birds were completely out of sight, Jusetsu let out a soft sigh.

"There we go. That swallow will lead the way to paradise."

"That's why you wanted a bird that could fly well, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Jusetsu with a nod. "I'm sure that bird will be able to fly over the sea without a hitch."

"I'm glad I was the one to make it then. I don't think the bird *you* were carving would have been able to even get itself off the ground."

"Shut up."

Jusetsu glared at Koshun before leaving his side. However, when she was only two or three steps away, she stopped.

"I...appreciate you making such a good bird for me. It proved to be a great help." Then, in a smaller voice, she said, "Thank you."

She tried to walk away again without turning around, but Koshun grabbed her hand and pulled her back.

When she looked behind her, she found that Koshun's face was close to hers. He stared at her, not saying a word. She could see a slight hint of confusion on his scarcely emotional face.

"What? Was it that much of a shock for me to thank you?"

"No, it's not that..." Koshun lowered his gaze and let go of her hand with a start. "It definitely was a surprise, but it was more... refreshing than anything else."

"Refreshing?"

"It made me happy. It felt like a cat that never really cared for me was finally giving me a tiny bit of affection. Oh, hey! Wait!"

"I'm not giving you any affection whatsoever—not even a tiny bit. Not even a sliver."

"All right. That's fine with me."

"What do you mean by that?! I'm..."

"Give me your hand."

"What?"

"Your hand, please."

"I refuse."

Koshun forcibly took Jusetu's hand and placed a small item in it. It was a charming little bird carved out of wood.

"What is this?" said Jusetu.

"A willow tit," replied Koshun, going into detail yet again. "You should paint it. It looks like you."

"Because...it's small?"

"Small and sweet."

Jusetu said nothing in return.

He must be talking about the bird, Jusetu thought. If he thinks that about me, he must have lost his mind. Who would say a cranky and irritating girl like me was sweet?

Jusetu stared at the willow tit carving. It may have been smaller than the sand swallow he'd made, but the design was just as exquisite. Its fine feathers looked soft, and its neck was tilted slightly to one side in the most adorable way. It was definitely a well-made piece.

“...The man that taught you this skill must have been an incredible craftsman.”

“He dreamed of working with gemstones someday—because if he did that kind of handiwork, he wouldn’t need to talk.”

“What do you mean?” Jutsu asked, cocking her head in curiosity.

Koshun looked longingly at the willow tit.

“Teiran was mute. He was born into a good family, but when they realized he wouldn’t be able to make it as an official, he was put up for adoption. Then, he was even made a eunuch for financial gain, and was sent to the inner palace. He worked at the office of the grounds, but he was noted for his loyalty and ended up being assigned to the crown prince’s administration instead and ended up as my caretaker.”

With his impressive handiwork and ability to create anything you could ever think of with his skills, Teiran captured the young Koshun’s heart in no time at all.

“He was a cheerful and gentle man. He might not have been able to talk, but for some reason, I could always tell what he was thinking. I knew when he was happy, when he was sad, or when something was troubling him. It must have been because we were together for so long.”

The look in Koshun’s eyes softened as he talked about his old friend—but then the expression suddenly slipped from his face.

“Teiran died when I was in the Gyoso Palace, after having my heirship annulled. That day, he had gone to get some mallow root from the gardens department in the inner palace. It was the perfect time of year to harvest them, and pickled mallow was my favorite. I’d told him there was no need, but Teiran went out with a smile on his face anyway. That was the last time I saw him alive. On his way back from the gardens department, some of the empress dowager’s eunuchs caught him. She was keenly aware of how much I relied on him and had been looking for an opportunity to rip him away from me. They accused him of stealing the mallows and tortured him to death. By the time I rushed over, it was too late. His injuries from being hit with the cane, being beaten, and kicked countless times had left his dead body in tatters.”

In contrast with the hideousness of what he was talking about, the way Koshun was speaking was eerily calm. His voice sounded unconcerned, as calm as like the surface of the water when there wasn’t

any wind—or like the stillness of the night. It was the kind of quiet that made you believe there were unfathomable monsters lying in wait with bated breath, deep in the darkness.

Jusetsu felt like she had caught a glimpse of the quiet hatred that lay deep within him. His hatred was starved, hungry for an outlet. Even after having the empress dowager beheaded, that hunger hadn't died away. The longer it remained quiet, the more that beast would eat away at the deepest recesses of his heart.

“Are you and Jiujiu friends again?” Koshun said.

The change of topic was so sudden that for a brief moment, Jusetsu couldn't understand what she'd been asked. Once she'd processed it, though, she answered.

“We...were never really friends in the first place.”

Jusetsu had not yet given Jiujiu the sipaotang candy, and they hadn't had any proper conversations either. Still, the two of them were just a consort and her lady-in-waiting—not *friends*—so it wasn't as if “making up” or “not making up” were even options.

“No need to be so defiant. It's tiring. I'm sure you want to get on well with her, don't you?”

“I've never thought anything of the sort.”

“Are you sure about that? You really seemed to take it to heart when she got angry at you.”

Jusetsu tried to answer back, but unable to find the words, she gave up.

“It's up to you whether or not to keep a lady-in-waiting,” Koshun went on. “It was your wish to have her in the first place, so why are you denying it?”

Jusetsu bit her lip.

“Do you reject people because of...*that* part of you?” he asked.

Koshun was talking about her being a surviving member of the Ran family. Jusetsu turned away from him.

“It's just in my nature,” she said.

“You'll only be able to get away with your lies for so long. You're not coldhearted enough to be able to push through against all reason.”

“What lies?!”

“Is it because you’re the Raven Consort?”

Jusetsu looked back at Koshun. “What did you just say?!”

“I’m asking you whether you have to keep people at a distance because you’re the Raven Consort—and not because of your background.”

Jusetsu examined Koshun’s face carefully. How much did this man know?

She silently averted her gaze.

“Jusetsu,” he called.

“I am not obliged to answer your questions, and you cannot force any answers out of me, either.”

That was how the Raven Consort was. Jusetsu turned her back toward Koshun and started to walk away.

“Jusetsu!” he called out again.

Refusing to stop, Jusetsu simply asked, “What is it?”

“I really think you should make up with her.”

Jusetsu stopped in her tracks. She thought about telling him that it was none of his business, but instead stayed quiet and turned around.

“Once she’s gone, it’ll be too late,” Koshun said.

His words were quiet, but they resonated profoundly with Jusetsu. She stared at him for a few moments, then left.

When she got back to the Yamei Palace, she found Jiujiu wiping down a latticed window. Since she didn’t have anything to do, she usually cleaned the palace during the daytime—just as she was doing now. When she saw Jusetsu had returned, she stopped what she was doing and gave her a slight bow.

“We sent off that skylark,” Jusetsu informed her.

Jiujiu’s face lit up. “Did you? Thank you so much!”

Jusetsu was relieved to see Jiujiu looking so happy. Thanks to this positive update, it seemed like she was going to avoid being lectured for going out alone yet again. Jusetsu sat down in her chair.

“I really think you should make up with her.”

Koshun's voice played back inside her mind. They never had that much of a relationship in the first place. Jiujiu was just fulfilling her duties as a lady-in-waiting, while Jusetsu just couldn't manage having one at all. And yet...

"...I'm sorry about yesterday."

Jiujiu, who was getting ready to boil some water, froze in surprise.

Jusetsu continued, "I heard that consorts were supposed to give things to their ladies-in-waiting, so I just thought I ought to give something to you. I thought that would...make you happier."

That's right. She wanted to make Jiujiu happy. She wanted Jiujiu to be pleased that she became her lady-in-waiting. It was all quite silly.

Jiujiu's eyes opened wide, and she dropped to her knees, overwhelmed with gratitude.

"No... You shouldn't apologize, niangniang. I wouldn't have blamed you if you had *beaten* me for what I said. It was rude, coming from a lady-in-waiting. No servant talks back to the person they work for! Kogyo scolded me for it too. You're so kind that I forgot my place."

She explained that she kept wondering when she was going to get punished or thrown out for the way she acted.

"I am not that kind of a person. This is my first time having a lady-in-waiting, so I simply didn't understand what to do."

"Does that mean...you're going to keep me?"

"Do you want to stay?"

"Well, I'm just worried about leaving you by yourself," said Jiujiu.

"I did everything by myself before you came."

"That's beside the point. You must have been lonely."

Jusetsu blinked. "...Not in the slightest."

"How can that be? I don't know a single thing about your circumstances, but you are always tense. You must be very tired every day."

These words pierced Jusetsu deep, straight through her heart. This girl had managed to see Jusetsu for who she truly was—and she did it just by being around her. She knew nothing of her situation.

She's right. I am tired, thought Jusetu. *But as exhausted as I truly am, there's no one I can turn to.*

Her eyes misted over with tears, and she let out a little sigh. "... The tea's boiling."

"Oh no!"

Jiujiu added some salt to the pot and stirred it around with a spoon. Steam wafted out and the aroma of tea filled the air. Jusetu closed her eyes and took in a deep breath, hiding her trembling fingers in her sleeves.

"Here you go, niangniang."

Jiujiu offered Jusetu a cup that she poured out. Jusetu stared at it for a few seconds, taking in the warm steam and the fragrance.

Then, out of nowhere, Jiujiu said, "I know that you dye your hair."

Jusetu opened her eyes.

"But Kogyo and I would never tell anybody—I'm sure you have your reasons—so you should be able to relax more when you're inside your own palace," Jiujiu said with a smile.

Jusetu looked down at her cup. "...Thank you," she said, reaching out to pick it up.

And with that, Jusetu ended up with yet another thing that she couldn't bring herself to cast away and abandon.

She didn't know which way to turn. These heavy weights—as warm and gentle as they felt—seemed to have coiled themselves around her legs, stopping her from moving forward. Layers and layers of chains were surrounding her body.

As the tea went down her throat, it felt excruciating warm.

Koshun woke up in the middle of the night, but it wasn't like he had been sleeping heavily in the first place. He just kept dozing, dreaming off and on as he wavered in and out of consciousness. Koshun sat up in his bed and looked at the curtains. Once his eyes had adjusted

to his surroundings, the thin silk fabric appeared vaguely white in the darkness. However...

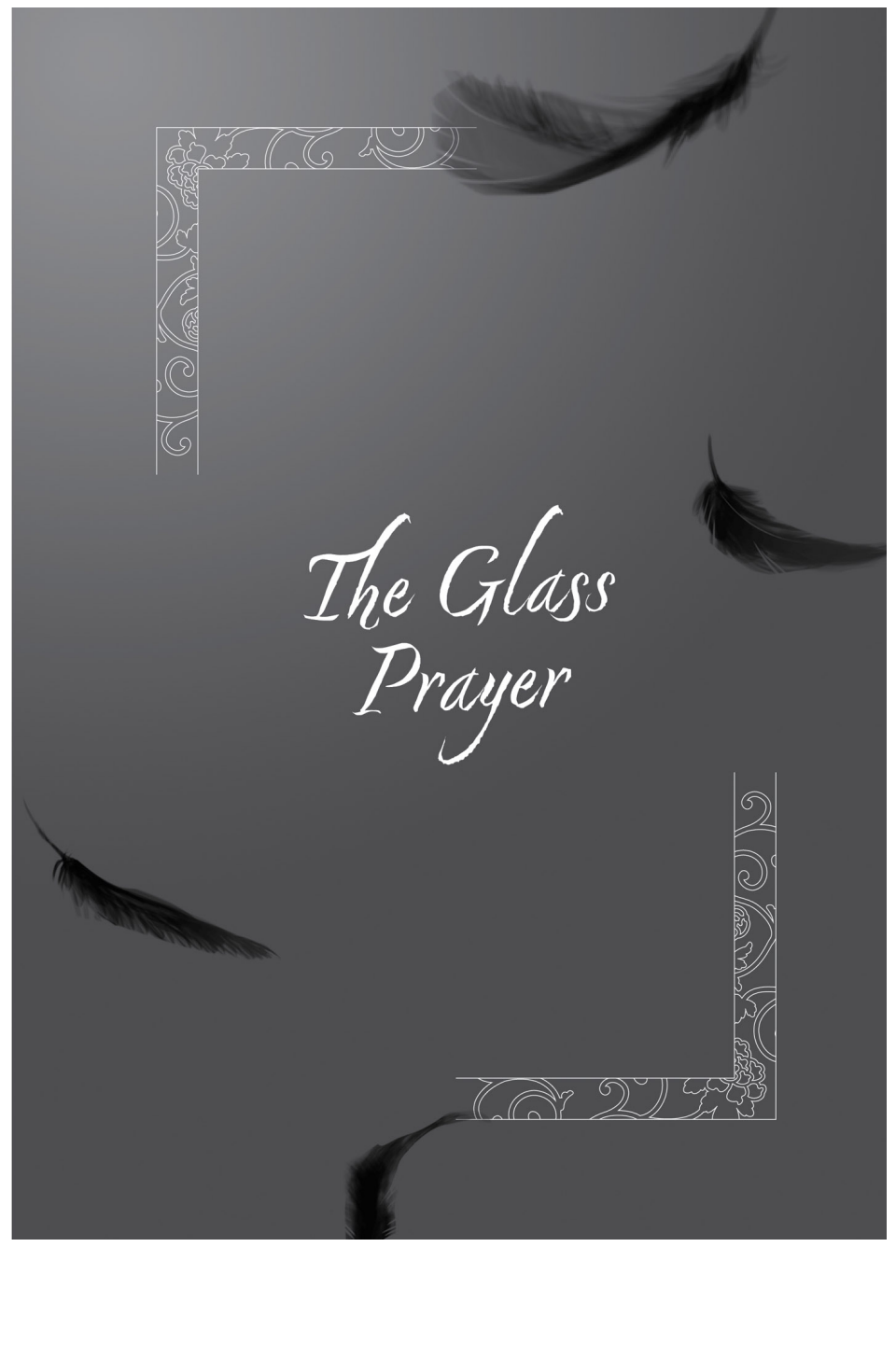
When he noticed the shadows of several figures standing on the other side of them, he got out of bed, opened the curtains, and walked through. He spotted two people standing in front of the entrance to the room. Neither of them moved an inch—they just stayed there, lingering. They appeared in the same spot every night. Amazingly, their forms were easy to make out, even in the dark. This proved that they weren't just ordinary humans. However, even if this wasn't the case, Koshun still would have known that they were ghosts.

"Mother... Teiran," he said.

The two people standing in front of the doors were indeed Koshun's mother and Teiran. Koshun slowly drew closer to them, but neither moved at all. They just stood still, as if they were guarding the doorway. Neither of them were in a good state. Koshun's mother was pale and spurting an enormous amount of blood from her mouth, and her robe was stained vermillion. She had been poisoned to death, after all. Teiran, who was standing next to her, was dressed in a torn robe that was soiled with dirt and blood. His face, on which he'd always worn that calm smile of this, was swollen from all the punches it had taken and had reddish-black and blue blotches all over it. Blood dripped from his hands and feet and fell onto the floor.

The two of them just stood there staring at Koshun, but he didn't find it frightening.

The scene was always the same, and by morning, Koshun would be fast asleep in his bed, and there would be no trace that his two loved ones had even been there.



The Glass Prayer

A NIGHTINGALE WAS CRYING OUT from somewhere. It was only able to sing so freely here because owls were shunned and therefore not kept in the inner palace. Uren Niangniang detested them, so even if you set them free, they would not survive there. Jusetsu opened up the lattice window. As usual, the lanterns on the eaves were not lit, so the outside of her palace was shrouded in darkness. The soft, spring night air glided across her skin, and it almost felt like she and the night were fusing together as one.

“Is His Majesty coming tonight?” Jiujiu asked as she was adjusting the mattress.

“I do hope not.”

Whenever Koshun came, it was always unexpected. He never sent any prior warning. Interacting with him was a nuisance, so it was more convenient for Jusetsu if he stayed away.

“Why are you acting all standoffish again? You’re the one who’s opening the window and waiting impatiently for him to arrive.”

Jusetsu was quiet for a moment, then closed the window. Jiujiu had gotten the wrong idea, and was under the false impression that Koshun was visiting the palace to buy Jusetsu’s affections.

“My gosh, Jiujiu. I’m the Raven Consort. Spending the night with him is not a service I will ever provide.”

“I understand that. But even so...”

She didn’t seem to *really* understand, though. Jusetsu dismissed her and opened the lattice window again. She perched on the windowsill and let the night air waft over her.

Going out at night here was generally discouraged. As a result, when the sun went down, the city gates would close, and people would be shut away in their own sections of the city. This was because Yeyoushen, the patrolling god of the night, was believed to appear after nightfall. It was common for parents to usher their children home, warning them, “If you don’t get back quick, Yeyoushen is going to take you!”

Things were the same even within the imperial estate. There were more than a hundred gates, both large and small, and they would all be closed. Coming and going were prohibited. However, there were

exceptions to be found everywhere. The inner palace and brothels in particular were exempt from these rules. People also took advantage of the deserted streets at night by holding clandestine meetings and conducting shady business activities during these hours.

“Getting taken away by Yeyoushen...” Jusetsu whispered as she gazed into the darkness.

Then Jusetsu spotted a small light in the distance, prompting her to get down from the window’s edge.

The emperor had not learned his lesson as he was back again.

Jusetsu closed the lattice, walked past the thrashing Shinshin, and looked over at the closed doors. They opened a few moments later as Koshun and Eisei arrived at the palace. Eisei puffed out the candlestick he was carrying.

Jusetsu appeared through the curtains, and Koshun sat himself down in a chair, completely unprompted.

“What do you want today?” snapped Jusetsu.

“The only time I had a particular objective in mind was when I first came to see you.”

He was going on the offensive today.

“In that case, I highly recommend you see yourself out.”

“How was the sipaotang I gave you the other day?”

“I gave it to Jiujiu.”

“Did you? Then, how about this?”

Koshun took an item wrapped in a handkerchief out from his breast pocket and placed it on the table. It had a faint, sweet aroma coming from it. Jusetsu sat down opposite Koshun and opened it up. Inside, she found another layer of wrapping, this time paper. When she peeled it back, she found some fuliubing inside. This was a sweet made by kneading flour, baking it, then covering it in white honey.

“You think you can simply gift me food and I’ll be content, don’t you?”

“Are you telling me you don’t want it?”

“If I didn’t, I would have kicked you out long ago.”

“Glad you like it that much.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I didn’t exactly *not* have a reason for coming here today,” Koshun went on, taking the conversation in the direction he desired.

If you need something, tell me that from the beginning, Jusetsu thought.

“There seems to be a ghost appearing in the inner palace.”

Jusetsu scowled. “I’ve grown tired of hearing about such things. What is it now?”

“I know I’ve already put you through a lot, but just hear me out. This ghost isn’t always around. You know how there’s a willow tree to the south of the Eno Palace? When its flowers come into bloom, the ghost appears underneath it, night after night. But when the catkins fall from it, it disappears.”

“Could it be...a willow flower spirit?”

“No...” Koshun said, hesitating a little and glancing over at Jusetsu. “People say it has silver hair.”

Jusetsu met Koshun’s gaze, and he didn’t say any more than that. This implied that the ghost was probably from the Ran family.

“...I expect that’s just a silly rumor with no basis in fact,” said Jusetsu.

“I’ve never seen them myself either, but it turns out that the rumor about the emperor and his family from the Ran dynasty appearing in the Flame Emperor’s bedroom actually *was* true.”

“Surely not.”

“Apparently, it was the previous Raven Consort who exorcized them.”

“...That’s the first I’ve heard about that.”

Reijo hadn’t told her about that. The Flame Emperor died before Jusetsu was even born. Maybe the older woman felt like the story wasn’t worth going out of her way to share.

“If the ghost under the willow tree *is* from the Ran family, then they must be different from the ones who appeared before the Flame Emperor. What could they be doing appearing beneath a tree, instead of haunting the person who killed them?”

Jusetsu quietly pondered on this for a moment. “Is it a man or a woman?”

“I’m not sure,” said Koshun. “I’ve heard the ghost has long, silver hair worn down and wears a red robe, but nobody has gotten a clearer look at it than that. What are you thinking?”

“I was wondering whether it could be Ran Hyogetsu.” That was the ghost that had appeared before Jusetsu and tried to threaten her into accepting his request. She still didn’t know what he wanted. “Did you discover anything more about him?” she went on.

Earlier, Jusetsu had asked Koshun to do some investigating. He gave a slight nod in return.

“He was the emperor’s youngest child, but since he was so far removed from power, not much was recorded about him. However, there are numerous anecdotes about an unusual man who called himself a shaman—like how he removed a curse that the empress had cast on him, for example. On one occasion, he even turned a rude eunuch into a fish in a pond in the inner palace. He tracked down some lost property for one of the princesses too—and he was said to be one of, if not *the* best-looking person in the imperial family.”

It sounded like the man had made more of a mark on the realm of bizarre legends than he had official history.

“People also say that the shaman who mentored him was either planning on adopting him as his successor or already had done so. I’m not sure why that was, though.”

“Adoption...”

In other words, he was going to be—or had been—removed from the imperial family. Being a shaman usually depended on your individual talents, so your family’s social standing wasn’t relevant. This being the case, there was no reason for a shaman to pass on their name. Why, then, would this shaman want to adopt him?

“You said that those ghosts appeared when the willow tree was flowering, didn’t you?”

That happened to be this time of year. *Never mind all this hemming and hawing—we better hurry up and see them for ourselves*, thought Jusetsu. It may not have been Hyogetsu, but if there was a ghost there, she still needed to send it off to paradise.

Jusetsu got up. "Take me there," she demanded.

"Okay," Koshun replied. With a blank look on his face, the emperor obliged without a single complaint and headed over to the doors.

Eisei, on the other hand, looked as if he was dying to make a thousand objections on Koshun's behalf. He lit his candlestick and led Koshun and Jusetsu out into the night. The moon was out that evening, so once their eyes had adjusted to the darkness, their surroundings appeared to be tinged with a pale shade of indigo.

"I hear that Yeyoushen can't roam about when the moon is bright. Is that true?" asked Koshun.

"Indeed. He hates bright lights."

"Is that why brothels and the inner palace have such bright lights?"

Koshun looked over at the neighboring palace in the distance. The numerous lanterns hanging from the eaves of the corridors and palace building were casting a dazzling display of light. It was a stark contrast to the Yamei Palace, which was always shrouded in darkness.

"I doubt you know anything about brothels, do you?" said Jusetsu.

"I've heard stories."

"They're bright on the outside," Jusetsu explained to him, "but there are barely any lights inside."

"To avoid starting fires by accident?"

"It's so that people can't see the prostitutes' faces clearly. Their strange, thick makeup and wrinkles cannot be concealed in the bright light."

"Oh," said Koshun, although Jusetsu couldn't tell whether he was impressed or disgusted. "You learn something new every day."

"Also, Yeyoushen sometimes disguises himself as a man. You never know whether he could be lurking among the ranks of your eunuchs. Be careful."

"Really? I'll be very careful then."

Unable to tell whether he was being serious or just dismissing her advice, Jusetsu frowned.

“I’m not joking, you know.”

“I didn’t think you were.”

It seemed as if he wanted to tell her she was being annoying, but his expression and tone of voice remained unchanged, so it was hard to know for sure. *This man really is impossible to read*, Jusetsu thought, feeling resentful about it.

“You never frighten people as a joke, nor do you ever say anything that won’t benefit the other person. I believe your words to be trustworthy,” he replied straightforwardly.

This response made Jusetsu feel strange. She had the same feeling that she got when Koshun called her by her name.

Jusetsu went quiet, and Koshun clammed up as well. As they walked along in silence, they reached the Eno Palace, and then headed even further north. A floral scent wafted from the hedge of red roses. Koshun took the knife that was hanging from his waist and cut off one of the stalks. He used its point to remove the thorns and offered it to Jusetsu without saying a word. Lured in by the flower’s scent, Jusetsu took it from him.

“Is it true that flowers won’t grow by the Yamei Palace?” Koshun asked as she was sniffing it.

“It is,” Jusetsu replied.

“How come?”

“Because Uren Niangniang hates them.” Jusetsu didn’t know why she answered him so easily. She really didn’t act like her usual self when faced with the emperor. “The only flower Uren Niangniang likes is the peony that I can create.”

“I’ve heard that the Yamei Palace used to be a shrine to Uren Niangniang,” Koshun said curiously. “Is it still used for worshipping her?”

I’ve said too much, Jusetsu thought, going quiet. She moved to cast the flower away, but hesitated and tucked it into her belt instead.

“Master,” Eisei said, coming to a halt. “It’s this way.”

The hedge of red roses had come to an end, and a number of trees had come into view. It appeared to be a peach grove. As they carried on walking, they found a willow standing in front of the area of peach

trees. It was just coming into flower, with fluffy catkins hanging from its branches. With the moonlight shining down from above, they almost looked as if they were sparkling.

Jusetsu let out a weak sigh. She could see the outline of a person among the weeping willow blossoms, with strands of silver hair swaying and glittering in the night air. The moonlight illuminated the silver figure as if they had sprinkled shiny scales all over them.

It was a woman with long, loose silver hair, standing around. There was a tinge of melancholy on her downturned face, but you could immediately tell that she was beautiful. She was wearing a red shanqun with a red skirt...or rather, it had been *turned* red. Blood had dyed the fabric that color. If you looked closely, you could see that she had a gaping wound across her thin neck, and it was bleeding profusely.

Eisei stifled a cry and clasped his hand against his mouth. This wasn't the first time Jusetsu had noticed that Eisei struggled with things like this. Koshun, on the other hand, was totally calm.

Jusetsu looked over the ghost from head to toe in great detail. She noted her undone silver hair, the laceration on her neck, and that her clothing was of the highest quality. Her shanqun was made of silk twill fabric with phoenix embroidery. Below it, the skirt had a surging wave pattern printed on her skirt. Even her shawl was dyed seven different colors and she had beautifully polished gems hanging from her waist.

There was no wind blowing in the grove, and yet the willow blossoms swayed, regardless. At that moment, the image of the ghost faded like smoke and dispersed.

"So it was a woman," remarked Koshun.

Jusetsu nodded. It wasn't Hyogetsu.

"With silver hair, we knew she would be from the Ran family... but *that* was a princess."

"She was wearing a phoenix robe."

A phoenix robe signified that the woman had been a princess.

"Do you have any idea who she was?" Jusetsu asked.

Koshun stroked his chin in thought. "I think there were three princesses around at that time, but until I can look into it more, I can't say for certain. I heard that when the soldiers surged into the inner palace under my grandfather's orders, some of the women in the inner

palace chose to kill themselves rather than take the humiliation.”

Did this mean that the ghost had actually cut her neck open herself?

“That ghost had an onyx gemstone hanging from her waist, didn’t she?” Koshun said. “I’ve seen one of those in the vault of the Gyoko Palace.”

“The vault?”

“It’s where our treasures are stored—including those of the Ran family.”

“Even the ornaments ripped from their corpses?” Jusetu said in an unintentionally disparaging tone of voice.

Koshun went quiet. It wasn’t as if he’d done that himself, so criticizing him wasn’t going to achieve anything.

Jusetu looked over at the willow tree. “If it’s there, will we find out who that ghost is?”

“We do have an offering register. The original owners of each item are recorded in there.”

“Right. In that case, show it to me.”

“...Really? Show you?”

“Let’s go to the vault. That would be most efficient.”

Koshun had government affairs to attend to. By the time he next had some time to spare, the flowers on the willow tree may have already withered and the ghost may have disappeared for the season. In that case, they would have to wait until next year to send the ghost on to paradise.

“That’s...a tough ask. The rules say that only I and Ui—the official who manages the vault—can enter.”

“If we don’t tell anyone, who’s going to find out?” Jusetu replied.

Koshun fell silent, his mouth gaping in astonishment.

“What did you just say?” said Eisei, glaring at her.

“How much authority did the Raven Consort have again...? According to the law...” Koshun mumbled to himself with his arms crossed.

“Raven Consort,” Eisei said to Jusetu in a subdued whisper,

“please refrain from forcing the master to accept such unreasonable demands. He’s such an earnest person that it will only cause problems. And that’s not to mention what would happen if you were to entice him to do something that overstepped those rules...”

Jusetsu let Eisei’s objections go in one ear and out of the other and she instead gazed at the willow tree. *Why was that ghost lingering about in a place like this?*

“Fine. Do as you please,” Koshun said.

Jusetsu looked over at him.

“You will be picked up before dawn. I have an imperial council meeting to attend, but I’ll give you the key, so do whatever investigating you want.” Pausing for a moment, Koshun gazed intently at Jusetsu’s face. “People say that the Raven Consort could have it all, if she just so wished—so I doubt that seeing a few treasures in a vault is going to faze you much.”

It seemed like Onkei had given Koshun a report of what he’d heard after all. Jusetsu didn’t reply and simply looked up at Koshun. The two of them spent a few seconds looking at each other in total silence.

“But why does she only appear under the willow blossom?” Koshun eventually continued, changing the subject—something that Jusetsu was happy to go along with.

“She can’t appear without the flower spirits’ help. I don’t know whether or not she had a strong connection to that willow tree when she was still alive, though,” said Jusetsu.

“Right. Every ghost has its own special set of circumstances.”

“Master,” began Eisei, who had been trying desperately to keep his mouth shut in spite of the annoyance he was feeling, “why don’t you ask the Raven Consort for advice on *that* issue we had discussed?”

“Advice?” asked Jusetsu, looking at the emperor and his eunuch in turn. “What kind of advice?”

“I was under the impression that you were going to discuss it with her tonight,” Eisei went on.

“Sei, enough.”

“But at this rate, master, your body is going to...”

"I said *enough*," Koshun uttered in a voice that was both quiet and authoritative—it was clear that he wasn't going to allow any further backchat.

"My apologies," the eunuch said, obeying the emperor's order.

"What is it, though?" Jusetsu asked, but Eisei had already clammed up and wouldn't answer.

She looked over at Koshun instead. "Have *you* seen a ghost too?"

Koshun raised one of his eyebrows with a start, but didn't say anything.

"Am I right...?"

"It's not as if I want you to do something about it." Koshun turned his face away from her, but Jusetsu kept staring at his side profile.

"Is it the ghost of your mother? Or that of your friend?"

If he didn't want Jusetsu to do anything about it, she assumed it had to be one of them—and it looked like she guessed correctly. Koshun stayed quiet, but this only served to validate Jusetsu's theory.

Jusetsu looked at Eisei. He started to speak in a hushed voice, as if he were afraid of what Koshun would think.

"Master has been struggling to sleep well as of late..."

Now that he mentioned it, Jusetsu noticed that the emperor's color looked a little off. Eisei seemed extremely worried about it.

"I've heard more than enough about that. Let's go, Sei," Koshun said. He suddenly began to walk away.

Jusetsu, lost in thought, watched him as he went.

About an hour and a half after the fifth drum sounded—sometime in the hour of 4 a.m.—Eisei came to pick Jusetsu up from the Yamei Palace. The sun hadn't come up yet, but the edges of the sky were starting to whiten. By this time, Koshun had already long started his imperial council meeting.

"I'm here to collect you," Eisei said, bowing with his raised hands folded in front of him.

He must have been extremely discontent with having to leave Koshun's side to go and retrieve Jusetsu. Eisei was clearly irritated and

unfriendly. Jusetsu followed him and left the Yamei Palace. As they had to go into the treasure vault, she left Jiujiu behind. While Jusetsu was putting her hair up, Jiujiu had repeatedly reminded her to be careful. It wasn't like she'd be putting herself in any danger, but it seemed like Jiujiu was anxious whenever Jusetsu was leaving the inner palace area. That said, she wasn't even going all the way to the outer court—her destination was the inner court, where the emperor lived, and it wasn't all that different from the inner palace.

Jusetsu wore the same black robe as she always did. On this occasion, being the Raven Consort would actually be to her benefit.

Eisei showed the guard a letter that Koshun had signed, and Jusetsu stepped through the inner palace gate. They headed toward the Gyoko Place Hall without using a litter. As they were walking, dawn began to break. The eastern edge of the sky was tinged with coral and, one by one, the stars disappeared from the sky as it turned from a deep blue to a pale indigo. The atmosphere had softened, as if it were falling into a comfortable doze. In the spring, even the night and the morning were somehow gentle, and the boundary between Jusetsu and the air around her was indistinct.

They cut across the cobbled square and traveled through a few more gates before the Gyoko Palace finally came into view. Its blue-glazed roof sparkled in the dawn light as if it was covered with jewels. The name “Gyoko”—meaning “exquisite lighting”—was very apt for the structure.

Two eunuchs were waiting in front of the palace building. When Eisei and Jusetsu climbed the steps, they respectfully opened the door for them. Inside, it was cold and quiet. There was a sparse hall lined with red-lacquered columns and ceramic and bronze pots placed on flower vase stands, and there was also a passageway extending toward the back. Dim light shone through lattice windows on three sides of the room. As they walked across the colored stones laid out in a floral pattern on the floor, a hard clacking sound resonated through the air.

With that still echoing in the background, Jusetsu began to speak. “Did the ghosts come last night too?”

She was talking about the ghosts that were appearing in front of Koshun. Eisei didn't even turn around and stayed silent for some time. However, once they reached the corner of the passageway, he looked back at her. He was frowning and had a grave expression on his face.

“Could you be so kind as to not tell master what I say?”

Eisei was clearly reluctant to discuss topics that Koshun had ordered him to avoid. With this issue, however, his concern for the emperor’s well-being trumped all else.

“Fine,” Juseitsu replied curtly.

For some reason, that made Eisei frown even harder.

“What is it?”

“Nothing... I was just expecting a more spiteful response from you.”

“What do you think I am?” said Juseitsu. *Does he think I’m some kind of wicked woman who’s twisting the emperor around her little finger?* she thought to herself. At the end of the day, it was always *her* that was being used to his advantage.

“My apologies,” said Eisei.

Then he started to walk again, speaking as he did.

“It seems like the ghosts only started appearing in front of master in the last month or so,” Eisei began as he walked. “I only found out about it recently. I was concerned about how pale he was looking, so I asked him how he was... Even the Winter Minister commented on master’s lack of sleep. I gave him a thorough questioning, and he finally told me the truth.”

He must have put him through a real grilling—polite only on the surface. It wasn’t hard to imagine Eisei acting in such a way. However, one thing he said stuck out to Juseitsu.

“Wait, the Winter Minister? Did you meet him? He doesn’t attend the imperial council meetings.”

“Master wished to ask him some questions about you, so he paid the Seiu Shrine a humble visit.”

“What a valiant effort—although I’m sure it turned out to be in vain...”

Eisei glanced back at Juseitsu, then immediately started talking again.

“It appears that the ghosts of Lady Sha and Brother Tei loiter in front of the doors in the middle of the night.”

“Brother Tei? Do you mean Teiran?”

“Indeed. That’s how I used to refer to him. He was old enough for me to have called him father, but he said I could call him Brother Tei. It was easier.”

“I see,” acknowledged Jusetu.

Had Eisei been attached to Teiran too?

“So, there are two ghosts. Do they both just stand there?”

“It would seem so. I asked the master if I should accompany him during the night as well, but he insisted that there was no need. Because of that, I don’t know what is actually happening. Since the pair of them simply stand there—without speaking or doing anything else—he wants them to be left alone...”

Jusetu sighed. “What a fool.”

Eisei stopped in his tracks and looked back at her with his eyebrows raised.

“That’s an *extremely* discourteous way to speak about the master,” he said.

He was quick on the mark. Fed up, Jusetu turned her face away. She could see the passageway split off in two different directions. Her eyes landed on a spot further away.

“Is that the bedchamber?”

The passageway extended out to a palace building at the back.

“Yes.” Eisei nodded in assent.

Jusetu stared intently at it. She could sense something there—but what was it?

“Would you be able to do anything about the two ghosts?” Eisei asked.

“It’d be no trouble at all. But...” Jusetu tilted her head to one side slightly. “Didn’t you say the ghosts only started appearing around a month ago?”

“That is correct.”

Jusetu closed her mouth and gazed over at the bedchamber again. “I would need to devise a way to do it.”

“What do you mean...?”

“Let’s start by getting the vault out of the way. Where is it?”

“Right... It’s this way,” Eisei said, looking skeptical.

He stood in front of Jusetsu and guided her there. They went around corner after corner—with Jusetsu following Eisei down whatever turns that he took—and eventually came to a secluded area deep inside the palace building. They had taken such a winding path here that Jusetsu didn’t feel like she would have been able to find her way back to the entrance again by herself. At last, a pair of doors came into sight. The entrance wasn’t particularly large, but it was sturdy-looking and made of iron. This had to be the vault.

An aging eunuch of small stature was waiting in front of the doors, alone. He was wearing a charcoal gray robe, and his dark gray futou—a type of headscarf that tied together at the back of his head—had snow goose flight feathers in it. The face of the elderly eunuch sagged and was lined with layers of wrinkles. His complexion, on the other hand, was healthy and glowing, which was a strange contrast for this peculiar eunuch to have.

The elderly eunuch gave them a deep bow. “I am Ui. I have been waiting for you,” he said, announcing his official position in a feeble and high-pitched voice.

“What is your real name?”

“I do not have one. Please, just call me Ui.”

He must have had a name before being appointed as the Ui, thought Jusetsu, but she stayed quiet and nodded. Ui took a key out of his breast pocket and placed it in the lock. He unlocked it, and Eisei and Ui worked together to pull the doors open with a creak.

“I am not permitted to enter, so I shall be waiting here,” Eisei said. *“Please make sure you take care not to damage anything you may find inside.”*

He put strong emphasis on the word “please.” *I’m not a child,* Jusetsu thought, paying no attention to this advice. Ui respectfully urged Jusetsu to enter as well. She took one step inside, then scanned her surroundings. It wasn’t a particularly spacious room, but the shelves were lined with rows of countless boxes of varying sizes. Jusetsu found the room suffocating, likely due to the lack of windows.

She proceeded into the center of the room, then stopped. There

were no shelves against the wall to her left, but it did have a mural on it. It was a picture of a bird—so round that it was almost a perfect circle—surrounded by a wave pattern, which seemed to represent the sea. The paint was an appropriate shade of bluish green as well. A forest of fruit trees of some kind was depicted on the eastern and western edges of the sea, but there were palaces belonging to gods in both directions. The image was old and seemed to be a map. The paint had remained so vivid because of the lack of light in the vault. Reijo had once showed Jusetu a similar picture. The round bird represented the land of Sho.

“Raven Consort, it’s over here,” Ui called out from the back of the room.

When she went over to where he was standing, she found him holding a wooden box. It was small enough to fit in his hands. Ui placed it on a table beside him. He opened the lid, revealing a gemstone inside—a red onyx.

“This gemstone was Princess Meiju’s belt decoration.”

“Princess Meiju...?”

“She was the second princess of the last emperor from the Ran dynasty. She was a beautiful and highly celebrated person,” Ui responded smoothly in his high-pitched voice. The way he was speaking, however, was monotonous, which made it sound like he was just repeating something he’d learned.

“She died at the age of twenty-four,” he continued. “When the imperial army stormed the inner palace, she couldn’t bring herself to let the enemy get their hands on her, so she pierced her throat with her own sword under a willow tree and passed away. This was the decorated belt that she was wearing at the time.”

“Under a willow tree...” Jusetu’s eyes opened wide. “Is that true?”

“I was the Ui at the time, so I am very well acquainted with the case. Here’s the sword she used to kill herself.”

Ui then opened another box that had been laid down on the table. Inside it was a short sword, and its scabbard was decorated with gemstones.

“And here is the offering register.”

A scroll was spread out on the table. It looked like he’d left open

the section where these two items were mentioned. True enough, the records for Princess Meiju's decorated belt and Princess Meiju's sword were written there.

"...Didn't you say she passed away when she was twenty-four? You said she was a beautiful and highly esteemed princess—was she really still living in the inner palace, and unmarried, at that age?"

"She was indeed."

"How come?"

Ui cocked his head to one side slightly. He didn't have any sort of expression in his face, so he just looked like a well-made doll with its head tilted to one side. Jusetu had always thought Koshun was expressionless, but even he was far more humanlike than this eunuch.

"I do not know," he said, immediately moving his head back upright. "Would you like to see a portrait of her?"

Perplexed as she was by Ui's lack of vigor, Jusetu nodded. Ui silently disappeared among the shelves, then returned moments later carrying a folding screen. One would have presumed it would be heavy for someone as small as him, but he was carrying as if it were as light as a feather. Ui opened the six-paneled folding screen up in front of Jusetu. Each panel had a person on it. There were pictures of women and men on it, all young and beautiful.

"This screen depicts the six members of the Ran imperial family who were lauded for their exceptional beauty. Princess Meiju was one of them."

Ui motioned her toward the panel on the far left. It had an illustration of a beauty with a silver updo, donning a blue robe. Her slender limbs were fragile, but her cheeks and eyes on her pale face were drawn with soft, graceful lines. Her appearance was reminiscent of mellow nephrite, glistening like dewdrops. It was definitely her ghost that they saw underneath the willow tree—although she gave off a very different impression here, not being covered in blood.

Princess Meiju had an unusual decoration in her hair bun. It was a glass comb with a milky white tint. It seemed to be shaped like a wave and had a peony decoration. In the portrait, she was touching it softly with her hand.

"Is that glass comb here?" Jusetu asked.

Ui moved his face close to the portrait and fixed his eyes on it. Then he turned his face toward Jusetsu. “No, it is not.”

“Really?” said Jusetsu, “Why wouldn’t they have kept such a precious item?”

“In those days, many treasures were taken away from the inner palace. A great number of superb pieces were scattered about and lost.”

“I see...”

Jusetsu stared at the folding screen as she thought things through. On the panel beside Princess Meiju’s, there was a portrait of a girl who looked even younger than her. Had that innocent-looking young girl, adorned in gold and silver jewels, also fallen victim to the merciless blade? Next to her, there was a boy of a similar age—and the following panel depicted a young man of around twenty. After that, there was a portrait of a woman of that same age, and on the final panel, there was...

Jusetsu laid her eyes on the panel that was furthest to the right. It was a portrait of a handsome young man. His hair was loose as opposed to tied up, and his robe was a shade of deep blue. Unlike the ghost that Jusetsu had seen, he had no haze of sorrow clouding his eyes. He had a cool and untouchable beauty to him, like that of the moon when it was bright.

It was Hyogetsu.

“That is the esteemed Hyogetsu, a descendant of the emperor,” said Ui, following Jusetsu’s line of sight. “He was a highly regarded shaman. He, in particular, was regarded as the most beautiful member of the imperial family.”

This was the same anecdote that Jusetsu had heard from Koshun. Ui’s words were so lacking in inflection that they seemed to flow like water. *Perhaps he has every possible historical fact and anecdote memorized in his head*, thought Jusetsu.

“All right. That’s enough for today.”

After hearing about Hyogetsu, Jusetsu decided to head back—but as she was heading toward the doors, she stopped in front of the wall mural again. She glimpsed at it, then started walking again. Once she was in front of the doors, she turned around and called out to Ui.

“Thank you for having me,” she said.

Ui placed his hands together in front of him in a gesture of appreciation.

“There is no need to thank me,” he said. “It’s a pleasure for me to be able to assist you in any way I can, dear Raven Consort. I am a humble manservant to Uren Niangniang, after all.”

Gray robes, like the one he was wearing, were the symbol of Uren Niangniang’s manservants.

Jusetsu then posed him a sudden question.

“You said you were Ui during the days of the Ran dynasty, didn’t you...? How old *are* you, actually?”

“I am not aware of my year of birth,” he replied simply.

When Jusetsu opened the doors, she found Eisei waiting for her. Jusetsu left Ui bowing his head deeply in respect and walked away from the vault. She let Eisei lead her through the passageways, her eyes fixed on the back of his dark green robe as they walked along.

After the hour of the monkey, which was between 3 and 5 p.m., Koshun finished up his government affairs and headed to the Seiu Shrine in his litter. On this occasion, he was welcomed into the palace building at the back, rather than at the shrine itself. Just like the shrine, the palace building’s cleanliness was top-notch, but its faded lattice windows, creaking floorboards, and rusty hinges that made a noise every time the door was opened or closed were all signs that its best days had long since passed.

Koshun was let into a room where the work officer, Setsu Gyoei, kneeled down and bowed to him. Concerned about his old age, Koshun suggested that he sit down. Inside the room, there was just a table, chairs, and two worn-out cabinets. Despite it being spring outside, it was dim and dreary in there.

Koshun looked at Gyoei, who was sitting opposite him. He was wearing a dark, bluish gray robe and a futou with northern pintail tail feathers in it. The robes that were worn by members of the Winter Ministry resembled those of the eunuchs—but they were not eunuchs themselves. However, unlike other officials, they didn’t have homes in the imperial estate and instead resided in this palace building. Those who joined the Winter Ministry cut ties with the rest of the world and

devoted themselves to Uren Niangniang.

Aside from those who brought in their tea, no other subordinates walked by the room, and it was quiet. This was the norm for Koshun's helpers too—but here, the people didn't make a single sound.

"I want to know about the Winter Minister Hakuen, who penned the *Divine Communicator Log*," said Koshun.

The *Divine Communicator Log* was the only document that contained a description of the Raven Consort. The name, Hakuen, contained characters meaning "white smoke."

"I tried to look back through the records," he continued, "but the name Hakuen wasn't listed as a Winter Minister for the previous dynasty. Why would that be?"

Gyoei pulled at his white beard and looked up into the far corner of the room. It was extremely disrespectful to act in such a way without answering the emperor's question. If Eisei had been there, he would have surely raised his eyebrows at that.

"I don't understand why you are so preoccupied with the Raven Consort, Your Majesty."

Koshun fixed his gaze on Gyoei, but the old man didn't even flinch and looked right back at him in the eyes. *This is no ordinary old man, is it?* Koshun sensed.

The emperor looked over at the lattice window. A dim light was shining through it.

"...She's alone," he said quietly.

Gyoei raised his white, frost-like eyebrows. "What was that?"

"It seems like Jusetsu has been forced into being alone. Why is that?"

With no lady-in-waiting or court ladies, Jusetsu had been living in that palace with only a bird for company. Koshun had wondered whether it was to hide the fact that she was descended from the previous dynasty, but there was seemingly something more to it. He couldn't help but wonder whether it was to hide an even bigger secret.

But if that was the case...

"Isn't it pitiful for her to be like that?"

Gyoei blinked—although his eyebrows were covering too much of

his eyes for anybody to see—and began to speak in an irritable tone of voice. “It’s just because she’s the Raven Consort.”

“So, you do know her name then,” Koshun quipped back.

Gyoei raised his eyebrows even higher—so high, in fact, that his wide eyes actually appeared from beneath them.

“I...”

“The only people who know Jusetsu’s name are me and those close to her. Who told you it?”

Gyoei clammed up and let his eyebrows fall back down. His detached demeanor had disappeared, and he was now frowning. He finally let out a sigh.

“I must have gone senile... The previous Raven Consort told me her name.”

“The previous one?” Koshun asked back, surprised to hear this. “Did you communicate with her?”

“I wouldn’t say we *communicated*... She just greeted me when the role changed hands.”

“Why would the Raven Consort make the effort to greet you? Is it because you both serve Uren Niangniang?”

Gyoei nodded with resignation. “That assumption is correct.”

“But the Raven Consort doesn’t worship Uren Niangniang *ostensibly*, not like you do here. She might be a special kind of consort, but she’s still a part of the inner palace. Your story doesn’t make sense, does it?”

Gyoei went quiet.

“Anyway, let’s get back on track. Who was Hakuen?” Koshun rested one arm on the table, slouched forward, and brought his face close to Gyoei’s. “*I’m* the one asking questions here. Is there a reason why you think you can get away with not answering them?”

“We...were formed in order to obey the Raven Consort’s commands.”

“What?”

“Well—never mind, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to explain. Hakuen is another name for a northern pintail bird. Northern pintails have black

feathers on their wings, but the ones from their chest to their eyes are white. This pattern resembles smoke—hence the name ‘Hakuen.’ It means ‘white smoke.’”

Gyoei took one of the feathers out of his futou. It was a northern pintail tail feather. “In other words, the name Hakuen refers to the work officer. All of them throughout history have had that same name.”

Koshun stared at Gyoei in silence. “Does that mean we don’t know which one wrote it?”

“No. It was written by the work officer who served during the first generation of the previous dynasty.”

“How do you know that?”

“That story was passed down to me.”

“Passed down...” Koshun glanced at the tail feather. “What kind of stories get passed down?”

Gyoei put the feather back in his futou. “The history of what once was, and how we continue to bury it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Could I ask to speak to you in private? If you are willing to keep it to yourself, Your Majesty, I will tell you the story.”

Koshun turned back toward the helpers who were standing in front of the door and ordered them to wait outside. Once the two of them were alone, Gyoei’s face appeared oddly younger. He could have been mistaken for an intrepid military officer rather than the old man he really was.

“As you know, there is a historical document in this land called the *Duo Encyclopedia of History*,” he began.

“Of course,” said Koshun.

“Are you aware of *why* it is called the *Duo Encyclopedia*?”

“I assume it is because it is divided into two volumes—one that outlines the legal code, and another in which historical facts are recorded.”

Gyoei shook his head. “It’s because there are two of them—hence ‘duo.’”

“Two?”

“Even if a historian is ordered to write falsehoods, he must record the truth somewhere—he would lose his self-respect otherwise. There is another document in which the real historical facts are recorded.”

Falsehoods...and real historical facts?

“What do you mean? If that document really does exist, where in the world could it...” Koshun stopped mid-sentence. He groaned. “It’s not...in the Yamei Palace, is it?”

“Your assumption is correct.”

Koshun put his hand to his forehead. The Yamei Palace stood by the Gyoko Palace, almost as if they were a pair.

The palace that shines brightly, even in the night.

“That document has been hidden, and the truth will continue to be buried. Hakuen replaced the Raven Consort’s true origin, and that was his role. The people’s faith has already faded, and eventually this shrine will fall into decay and the work officer will no longer be needed. One day, the Raven Consort will also be dismissed. That is fine. We will finally be able to end our duties. Both the Raven Consort and I are just waiting for that day to come.”

Koshun leaned forward. “So, what is the historical truth?”

“Ask the Raven Consort. Request to see the counterpart to the *Duo Encyclopedia of History*.”

“Ask Jusetsu? How do I know whether she’d show it to me?”

“I expect the Raven Consort can see that the stars are aligned. You are from the Ka—summer—family, and she has a wintry name, as the second character in her name means ‘snow.’ This may be some kind of divine guidance from Uren Niangniang...or perhaps, it’s a twist of fate that’s even greater than Her...”

“What do you mean by that?” Koshun asked. Gyoei left it at that and went quiet. It was as if he were saying, *“If you have any more questions, just ask Jusetsu.”*

Koshun got up from his seat and headed toward the door.

Gyoei called out after him. “Your Majesty. You haven’t consulted with the Raven Consort about your insomnia, have you?”

“...I don’t need to.”

“I highly recommend that you ask for her advice as soon as you

possibly can.”

With that, he placed his hands together in a gesture of respect, like one of the emperor’s regular subjects—but Koshun could no longer believe that this old man was one of them.

How can I send Princess Meiju to paradise?

Jusetsu was inside the Yamei Palace, absorbed in her own thoughts. The tea that Jiujiu had poured for her had gone cold long ago, but not wanting to disturb her lady’s pondering, she didn’t come and give her another cup.

And there’s Hyogetsu.

She couldn’t just leave him alone either. She was expecting him to appear in front of her again, but so far, there had been no sign of him. The only thing she felt was a strange sense of foreboding—but that may have been because she didn’t know what his intentions were. *What is he...*

At that moment, Jusetsu sensed somebody’s presence and looked up. “Back again?”

I’m sure you don’t have that much time on your hands, Jusetsu thought as she opened the doors using just one finger. Koshun was standing there.

“If you’re here to ask me about the Gyoko Palace vault, then yes, I did pay it a visit. It turns out that ghost was that of Princess...”

Before Jusetsu had the chance to finish her sentence, Koshun had made it all the way over to the table. A moment later, Eisei appeared from the doorway, looking like he’d been rushing to catch up with Koshun. Usually, *he* was the one who took the lead.

“Show me the *Duo Encyclopedia of History*,” Koshun said.

His tone of voice was calm, but also uncharacteristically rude. It was the first time Jusetsu had seen him speak in such a way. Koshun was breathless. *He didn’t...run here, did he?* Jusetsu thought.

“The work officer told me about it. He said the counterpart to the *Duo Encyclopedia of History* is here, in this palace. He said I should get you to show it to me. He...”

Koshun had a stern expression on his face. This, too, was an

unusual sight—he always looked so unaffected.

“He is not one of my subjects. He’s one of your manservants, isn’t he?”

Still sitting in her seat, Jusetu looked up at Koshun. “...He is a manservant of Uren Niangniang—not me.”

“He said he obeys your commands.”

Ui’s face came to Jusetu’s mind. He’d said that he’d be happy to take on any job that the Raven Consort needed doing. Uren Niangniang’s manservants wore dark gray robes.

“The Winter Minister also told me something else. He said you must have sensed that the stars were aligned. My last name is Ka, meaning summer, and your name has a wintry element to it. What does that signify?”

Stupid, stupid Setsu Gyoei.

What was he doing, revealing all that information, only to leave the rest for her to deal with? Jusetu bit her lip in frustration.

“What are you hiding?” Koshun asked.

“I should be the one asking *you* why you’re attempting to find out information that’s been intentionally concealed!” Jusetu snapped. She knew this wasn’t going to end well. She should have never gotten involved with the emperor.

Koshun stared at Jusetu for a while, then began to speak. “Because you’re so pitiful.”

These words made Jusetu freeze with panic.

“You’re being forced to stay by yourself for the sake of these secrets, aren’t you? I don’t believe you really *want* to be alone. You’d actually like to get closer to your lady-in...”

Unaware of what she was doing, Jusetu grabbed hold of her cup of tea and pouring the contents all over him with vigor.

“Pitiful, am I? How dare you...!”

Horried, Eisei tried to run over to her, but Koshun put up his hand to stop him.

“If I phrased it poorly, then I apologize—but the truth remains that I do feel sorry for you. Did I hit a nerve?”

Koshun looked Jusetsu in the eyes, with cold tea dripping from his hair. Jusetsu glared back at him and put the teacup back down on the table. She silently turned away from him and disappeared inside the curtains. Then, she pulled a red sandalwood box out from underneath her bed. She picked it up and carried it back over to Koshun.

“Try repeating what you just said after you’ve had a read through this—If you can bring yourself to do so, that is.”

She opened the lid and took out what was inside—a scroll made from bamboo strips, bound together with string. Jusetsu hurled it toward Koshun, but at that moment, the strings holding the bamboo scroll together snapped. Bamboo scattered across the table, thunking as the pieces clunked against one another.

Jusetsu gasped, gazing down at the dispersed strips. Reijo had warned her that she should be careful with the scroll because it was so old. *What have I done?*

Koshun picked up the loose bamboo strips and lined them up, one by one. Jusetsu snatched them out of his hands and pulled all the scattered strips toward her.

“I’m the only person who can put them back in order... I’ve read it so much that I could recite it from memory.”

Jusetsu set the unraveled bamboo strips aside and rearranged them from one end to the other. Koshun silently watched her do this, listening to the sound of them being laid on the table.

“Reijo showed me this a year after I first came here. I couldn’t read or write, so she had to teach me. I couldn’t even read it right away, so I had her read it out to me.”

That’s why Reijo’s spoken words were etched more deeply in her memory than the written word.

“...‘She flew away from her secluded palace in the west, and after 8,001 nights, Uren Niangniang discovered this island where juniper trees grew and perched on a branch to rest her wings. She then chose two people from the populace, one to be the Summer Sovereign, and one to be the Winter Sovereign.’”

She wasn’t even reading the bamboo strips—the words were just tumbling out of her mouth.

Jusetsu looked at Koshun. “Do you want to hear the story?” she

asked.

A moment later, Koshun nodded slowly. "I do."

Jusetsu let out a deep breath and closed her eyes. Then she began.

The Summer Sovereign, a king, took care of governmental affairs, whereas the Winter Sovereign, the witch queen, presided over rituals. The role of the Summer Sovereign was inherited by men in a specific bloodline, but the Winter Sovereign was always a girl chosen at random by divine revelation. The Winter Sovereign's power came from Uren Niangniang and she passed on the words of the goddess. For more than 500 years, generation after generation of these two sovereigns ruled the land in peace—but eventually, war broke out. At this time, the Summer Sovereign—the youthful king Sho—murdered the young Winter Sovereign, Sui. The reason behind the killing wasn't clear. It may have been because Sui rejected the fact that Sho had a profound love for her, or perhaps he detested how his younger brother and Sui had communicated—it was something along those lines. Sui was described as a girl with a crystal-clear beauty to her. It was as if she emitted a pure light from her very being. Sho loved her—he loved her so much that it made him want to kill her.

Several hundred years later, an army centered around a subordinate of the Winter Sovereign—the head priest—and an army in support of the Summer Sovereign, went to war against one another. There had been numerous Summer Sovereigns since the incident, but no new Winter Sovereign had emerged. Uren Niangniang had been silent. The land fell into ruin, and it wasn't long before the Winter Sovereign was consigned to oblivion, and the Summer Sovereign lost his title as well. Several dynasties sprung up afterward, only to die out just as quickly. But then, one day, an army appeared from the countryside, pulverizing all opposition and breaking down any obstacles in their way as they advanced toward the imperial capital. This army was led by Ran Yu, whose silver hair earned him the nickname "the Silver Army General." Not even thirty years of age, he was a man with a spirit not unlike a young lion. Ran Yu was accompanied on his march by a young girl named Kosho, who was only twelve years of age. Ran Yu had been the one to give her this name. Since she had been a slave, she'd never had a name of her own.

Kosho was the Winter Sovereign that Uren Niangniang chose. A

golden chicken guided Ran Yu toward her, and he saved her from the clutches of her slave owner. In turn, Kosho used her abilities to help Ran Yu. With the Winter Sovereign by his side, it didn't take very long for Ran Yu to seize power. He became ruler at the age of just twenty-eight. After nearly a thousand years apart, the Summer Sovereign and the Winter Sovereign were back together again.

Ran Yu knew that it had been the loss of the Winter Sovereign that had started the conflict. The Winter Sovereign was indispensable. Without her, there would be no Summer Sovereign either. It was the presence of the Winter Sovereign that gave the Summer Sovereign his regal status. It was even said that Uren Niangniang's long silence had been a punishment to the Summer Sovereign for murdering the Winter Sovereign all those years ago. The land had fallen into devastation because it had lost Uren Niangniang's divine protection. If he wanted to retain his status as the Summer Sovereign, he couldn't lose the Winter Sovereign. This fact was engraved deep into Ran Yu's memory.

However, Ran Yu wouldn't let Kosho call herself a sovereign. He insisted that having two sovereigns would plant the seeds of war yet again. Nobody knew whether it was because he wanted to keep his authority all to himself, or whether he was really worried about another conflict breaking out. He had a building made for her in the inner palace and shut her away in there. He cut off her priests, snatched away any real power she would have once had, and gave her the title of the Raven Consort. He counted her as one of his consorts, but—as one would expect—never made her stay in his bedchamber. He knew that his love for the Winter Consort would have instigated another war.

Kosho consented to this. She made a vow, accepting that she would be shut away and would stay silent. After all, she adored Ran Yu. His words meant everything to her. She kept Uren Niangniang under her palace and became her keeper. From then on, the purpose of the Raven Consort's existence was to stay in the Yamei Palace where she could protect Uren Niangniang, and to validate the Summer Sovereign's regal status.

Ran Yu compiled his own historiography. He came up with a false history in which the two sovereigns never even existed. The names of the Summer Sovereigns and Winter Sovereigns were buried. Hakuen gave the Raven Consort a new backstory, setting it up to look like the Raven Consort was just a descendent of a shrine maiden who worshipped Uren Niangniang. That was what the Winter Sovereign

wanted.

“...That’s more or less what happened.”

Jusetsu let out a sigh. When she looked up, Koshun was gazing right at her. His expression, as usual, was impossible to read—but his eyes were opened slightly wider than normal, and his mouth was hanging open. This implied that he was somewhat surprised, at least.

“Was everything you just told me true...?” he asked quietly.

“If you don’t believe me, then suit yourself—but this is the only story that I know.”

Koshun went quiet and looked down. The Flame Emperor had taken over the throne from the Ran lineage and had kept the imperial city and imperial estate just the way they had been during the Ran Dynasty. This was simply because it was more convenient to do things that way, but it *had* made it easier for him to ascend the throne—after all, he didn’t abolish the Winter Sovereign.

Koshun began to speak again. “Are you saying that I am only able to preserve my status as emperor because *you* are here? You...” Seeming uncertain, he choked on his words. “Have the Raven Consorts really been satisfied with that? With having their royal title snatched away from them and being shut inside this palace all alone?”

Jusetsu glared at him. “What are you suggesting that we do? Start calling ourselves the Winter Sovereigns again? That could cause an unnecessary war.”

“Is that a good enough reason to see out your whole life here in silence? You have no duty nor obligation to do that. Haven’t you ever wanted to just quit and...”

“Trust me—if quitting was an option, I would have quit long ago!” Jusetsu yelled. “Who would choose to stay as the Raven Consort of their own free will?! But Uren Niangniang has gotten her claws in me. It’s *she* who gets to choose who becomes the Raven Consort...or the Winter Sovereign, should I say. That golden chicken is just here to pass on the message. We Winter Sovereigns have kept that goddess from abandoning us. We become one with her, if you will. That’s why we, too, are unable to leave this place. We can’t even take a single step outside the imperial estate. We’d be betraying Uren Niangniang if we

did.”

Koshun frowned. “In what way?”

“The Raven Consort’s life is in Uren Niangniang’s hands. If I betray her, she will take away my life. There’s nothing anyone can ever do to change that.”

Jusetsu’s response made Koshun’s brow furrow even more. She kept repeating, “There’s nothing anyone can ever do to change that,” over and over, as if the words were blood that she couldn’t help but cough up.

“On nights when there is no moon in the sky and everything is pitch-black, she slips out of here, takes on the form of Yeyoushen, and roams around... I’m sure it was on that one night that she got her claws into me.”

“When?”

“The night that my mother ran away with me.”

On that evening, Jusetsu had wandered around until the sun went down. She wore herself out and fell asleep against the city gate. The moon wasn’t out that night, and on evenings like that in particular, people weren’t supposed to be outside in the dark. It must have been then that Uren Niangniang chose her. It was just on a whim...

“I can’t escape from here. In order for her to keep her secrets and to avoid gathering people to become her subordinates, the Raven Consort is prohibited from allowing others to get close to her. Reijo taught me as much. We must have pride in being the Winter Sovereign and maintain our silence so as not to bring undesirable calamities our way. We must not be greedy and must not want for anything, as that is what brings about disaster. Do you understand? Do you understand how it feels for me to be trapped here, existing for the sake of the kin of an emperor who had my entire family line murdered because of the actions of the Ran lineage—because of the actions of my own ancestors? Do you know how difficult it is to live inside this body with bated breath, knowing that I will be killed if my secret is...”

Jusetsu’s voice was shaking, and she bit down on her lip. She wished that someone would answer her—if they only could. Why did she have to live here in this palace, of all places? She couldn’t want for anything, she couldn’t truly connect with others, and she couldn’t even escape. *Why?!*

“Do you understand now? Try to repeat what you said one last time. Tell me how pitiful I am. Tell me I’m pitiful, as if it has nothing to do with you!”

Jusetsu grabbed her cup of tea and flung it against the wall. The fine ceramic cup cracked apart all too easily, the sound ringing out like shattering ice.

She breathed heavily and scowled at Koshun. If there was one thing she wasn’t going to do, it was cry. She didn’t want him to take any more pity on her. She didn’t want him to make assumptions about how she felt based on such a silly emotion. Regardless of how she felt about her life so far and how she would feel about the life she was obliged to carry on living, she did not want to be pigeonholed with that word.

Koshun’s face was pale and his lips were pursed. He looked like he was struggling to find the right words to say.

Jiujiu may have heard the cup of tea smashing because she discreetly peeked out from the back of the room. When she saw the broken pieces scattered on the floor, she looked surprised and slowly made her way toward them. She crouched down and started gathering them together, but as she was turned away, Jusetsu called out to her.

“Leave, Jiujiu. I’ll pick them up later. You’ll hurt yourself.”

“No, but...”

Her voice startled Jusetsu. That wasn’t how Jiujiu usually sounded. It was like one voice split in two—two sounds merged together. It was peculiar.

Duo-vocalization. This was how people sounded when a ghost was possessing them.

“Jiu...”

“Don’t move, Raven Consort.”

Jiujiu—or rather, the ghost that was possessing her—stood up tall with a piece of the broken cup in her hand. Jusetsu almost went to step forward but stopped herself. The ghost who was possessing Jiujiu was pressing the sharp point of the fragment against her thin neck.

“Hyogetsu!” Jusetsu exclaimed in anguish.

Jiujiu’s lips pulled back and moved. It looked like the ghost was

trying to smile.

“That is the correct answer. Very smart.” The split-apart voice sounded as if it was mocking her.

“No other ghost would come up with the cruel idea of using the life of the human they possessed as a shield so quickly, you lout.”

“Wouldn’t they? Back when I was a shaman, you saw that trick all the time.”

“Just leave Jiujiu alone.”

“I’m the one making demands here, Raven Consort.”

When Jusetsu tried to move her hand, he dug the broken piece into Jiujiu’s neck. Jusetsu could do nothing but bite her lip and stay still.

“Are you talking about the request you mentioned before?” Jusetsu asked.

“Indeed, I am,” said Hyogetsu.

“You’re not planning to revive the Ran lineage, are you? Or is it the curse killing of the emperor that you so desire?”

Koshun darted his eyes toward Jusetsu, but she didn’t look in his direction.

“Surely not!” Jiujiu—or more accurately, Hyogetsu—laughed sardonically. “Things like that do not interest me. There’s just... There’s just someone I want you to save.”

His tone of voice had changed, and Hyogetsu narrowed his eyes in desperation.

“Oh, Jusetsu. Raven Consort. Listen to my request, won’t you?” He sounded earnest as he strengthened his grip. The point of the piece of broken ceramic was pressed hard against Jiujiu’s skin. Jusetsu held her breath.

“I told you before that I was willing to listen, at least. Just leave Jiujiu’s body.”

You could hear the impatience in her voice. She wasn’t going to let Jiujiu get hurt. The girl never should have got involved with her in the first place. If Jusetsu hadn’t appointed her as her lady-in-waiting, she never would have been by her side. She was a kindhearted, ordinary girl. That’s why...

“Jusetsu, I...”

Hyogetsu took a step forward to plead to Jusetsu for help. At that very moment, the point of the fragment slipped and made a single cut in Jiujiu’s skin. Red blood suddenly oozed out of it.

As soon as Jusetsu saw this, she felt something stirring deep inside her and chills spread over her entire body.

“Leave Jiujiu alone!”

Starting from the tips of her fingers, her hair stood on end. It felt like a hot breeze was brushing up against her skin. She didn’t move an inch, and yet the decorations in her hair made a sound. Gradually, this shaking got more and more intense, and eventually, her ornate hairpin and other hair decorations flew off. Her done-up hair came loose and fell against her back. It fluttered about—as if her robe had been swept up by the wind—and became disheveled. The strange thing was that there wasn’t any wind blowing in the room whatsoever. The inside of her chest felt boiling hot and freezing over, all at the same time. Not feeling like herself, she pointed at Hyogetsu and started to speak.

“Does ‘get away from that girl’ mean nothing to you?! I *command* it!”

A gust of wind blew through the air. The curtains flapped and the table moved. The wind undulated into one swell and hurled into Hyogetsu’s—no, Jiujiu’s body. Jiujiu’s legs floated in the air, but that very next moment, she fell back down on the spot, as if the string that had been holding her up had snapped. Jusetsu heard a faint scream, but it didn’t sound like it was Jiujiu’s voice. A moment later, the violent wind seemed to vanish. The tablecloth that had been covering the table gently fell to the floor.

Jiujiu was collapsed on the ground, and a dumbfounded young man stood beside her. It was Hyogetsu.

“How dare you use force to rip me out of...”

Before he had the chance to finish his sentence, Jusetsu turned her hand toward him. Heat gathered in her palm, a haze shimmered in the air, and she started forming petals on it. The light red petals appearing one at a time were glowing faintly and were creating a peony.

“If you can’t get over to paradise on your own, then I shall send you there myself.”

Startled, Hyogetsu stepped back. Juseitsu couldn't hold back the torrent of heat that swirled around in her chest. She felt like a furious flame was about to explode inside her body. She couldn't even hear Hyogetsu say anything. It seemed like some other version of herself, somewhere else, was telling her to stop, but the heat was controlling her body and she couldn't heed its words.

She took a step toward Hyogetsu. There was fear in his eyes. Juseitsu, undeterred, held up her hand. The peony was trying to transform into a pale red flame. Even if she had tried to stop it, she wouldn't have been able to do so. She was engulfed by the torrent inside of her. Juseitsu no longer felt like herself.

Everything was about to be swept away by that tremendous heat. But then...

"Juseitsu," said Koshun, grabbing her arm.

She gasped.

The moment he called her name, it felt like things came back into focus.

Koshun's voice made her heart quiver like ripples on the water, and the waves permeated all the way to her core. It felt like the curtains that had been covering up her body had been ripped away, and a burst of light had poured in all at once. *What is happening?* She kept blinking over and over again.

The heat that had been raging so fiercely was cooling down as gently as the tide retreating from the shore. The force that had been controlling her body was fading away. Juseitsu looked up. Koshun's face seemed to stand out so strikingly in comparison with the other things around him.

Why was it that whenever Koshun called her name, it sounded so different?

She felt strange. She couldn't fight it.

The peony vanished from Juseitsu's palm. She let out a deep breath and eased the tension in her shoulders and the rest of her body, too. She had gotten quite stiff and tense. What, though, could she have possibly been tense about?

Koshun let go of Juseitsu's arms. When they dropped back down, Hyogetsu—whose face had been tensed up—let out a faint sigh of relief.

“Sei,” Koshun called out to Eisei, who’d been watching on nervously.

He blinked as if he’d just come back to his senses. He worked out what his master was asking of him without any need for verbal communication—as he so often did—and went over to Jiujiu.

He picked her up in his arms. “She’s just unconscious,” he announced.

“Lay her down over there,” Jusetsu said, pointing at the bed inside the curtains.

Eisei nodded and took her over to it. She watched him do this, then shifted her gaze toward Hyogetsu. He braced himself for whatever was coming.

“What was your request? Tell me,” Jusetsu asked again, but there was no reply from Hyogetsu. He still had his guard up—he perhaps was still frightened by the prospect of being forcibly sent to paradise.

“You said there was someone you wanted me to save. Who is it?”

Hyogetsu seemed hesitant and couldn’t say a word. Jusetsu stared at him and engaged in her own speculation for a few moments.

“Let me guess... Is it Princess Meiju?”

Hyogetsu gulped, looking as if he’d just swallowed something bitter. It seemed like she’d hit the nail on the head.

“Princess Meiju... The second princess?” Koshun said, staring ahead blankly as he reached back into his memory.

“That’s right,” Jusetsu nodded. “She would have been your aunt, wouldn’t she, Hyogetsu? Your mother’s sister.”

“She...didn’t have the same father as my mother. She was younger than me as well.” Hyogetsu finally spoke, but his voice was almost a whisper.

“There were a lot of stories about you in the inner palace, weren’t there?”

He apparently turned a rude eunuch into a fish in the inner palace pond, and even found a missing item for the princess. The list of his tales was endless.

Jusetsu then remembered a story that Koshun had told her.

"I assumed that you were friendly with her because of that. It also sounds like you were planning on leaving the imperial family and getting adopted by your shaman mentor. How strange... Why bother taking on the last name of a mentor when there's no motivation to succeed his position? And conversely, getting rid of the last name Ran was intriguing..."

Hyogetsu's eyes darted about the room as if he was unsure what to say. Jusetu shifted her gaze toward Koshun. It didn't look like he'd put two and two together yet.

"This may not be of any interest to you, but in this world today, there are laws against marrying within your own family, or marrying someone of a different social rank," said Hyogetsu.

People couldn't marry anybody from their same family, and although prostitutes could be bought out and kept as mistresses, they were not allowed to become a full-fledged wife. Those were the rules.

"Those rules didn't exist in the olden days," he went on. "If you peruse historical writings or legends, you will find many cases from the old dynasties in which older brothers would marry their younger sisters—as long as they had a different mother—and many nieces would marry their uncles. It was only made forbidden at the start of the Ran Dynasty,"

"So, you're saying..." said Koshun, stroking his chin, "that you wanted to marry someone from your own family, so you tried to get rid of your last name and distance yourself from the Ran family. Is that right?"

Hyogetsu fell silent.

"It wasn't Princess Meiju, by any chance, was it?" asked Koshun.

Hyogetsu didn't answer him, so Koshun looked at Jusetu instead.

"The emperor and the members of the imperial family who ended up as ghosts appeared at the Flame Emperor's bedside and were exorcized by Reijo. If your lover was one of them, there would be no reason for you to still be around, but she wasn't. That's why you're asking me to save her, isn't it?"

In that case, there was only one person his lover could be—Princess Meiju.

"That makes sense," said Koshun, but his face was expressionless

as he tilted his head to one side. “Why now, after all this time?”

Hyogetsu had spent so much time in Reki Province possessing that would-be shaman. Koshun made a fair point—why would he come to Jusetsu *now*?

“I...was in the inner palace,” Hyogetsu replied slowly. “I ended up as a wandering ghost, and before I knew it, I was in the inner palace. I looked for Meiju. I heard that she killed herself with her own sword here.”

With that, Hyogetsu heaved a sigh of clear sorrow.

“We were about to get married. As long as I left the Ran family, even my grandfather—the emperor—would have permitted it. I had just presented her with a proposal gift. She was so full of joy too. But then we lost it all.”

After he was killed, Hyogetsu roamed about the inner palace, which had been devastated and ravaged beyond recognition, looking for Meiju—or at least her body. The cobblestones were stained with blood and the bodies of ladies-in-waiting and court ladies had been casually thrown onto the gardens. There was a strong stench of smoke in the air, suggesting that one of the palace buildings had burned down. Nonetheless, as Hyogetsu told them, he kept on wandering about.

“I couldn’t find Meiju’s bones. Perhaps they had already been taken away. But I did find something... There was a ghost under the willow tree. Meiju’s ghost.”

Hyogetsu looked to the ground. His downcast eyes clouded over.

“It was a vision of her in her final moments. She was standing there with blood pouring from her neck. She must have died under that tree. My voice wouldn’t reach her. There was something else crowding her mind, so she couldn’t hear me. There was no way that I could send her to paradise, nor could I travel there with her. I decided to turn to my mentor for help, but the Flame Emperor had captured or banished all the shamans. Those who were employed by the Ran family were executed. My mentor apparently managed to escape in some way, but not even I was able to trace him. I decided to leave the imperial city and look for another shaman who would be able to save Meiju.”

“Didn’t it occur to you to go to the Raven Consort, like you have now?” Koshun said.

Hyogetsu glanced over at Jusetsu at that. “The Raven Consort exorcized the ghosts of the imperial family, the emperor included. Exorcism is not the same as saving them. It involves driving them away to paradise without their consent. Their souls disappear. Turning to the Raven Consort was not an option. If I wasn’t careful, she’d exorcize me—just like she did to my other relatives.”

This was why he was so wary of Jusetsu whenever he was faced with her and always used other people as pawns.

“And yet, occasionally, I would return to the inner palace to see Meiju. Her ghost was not seeking revenge on anyone and simply appeared under the willow tree when its blossoms were there to help her. I thought it unlikely that even the Raven Consort would attempt to exorcize her, but...Meiju would never respond to the sound of my voice.”

Whenever he went back to see Meiju, Hyogetsu would get his hopes up and call out to her, convincing himself that maybe *this* would be the day that she would answer him—but time after time, he was disappointed and would leave the inner palace again in search of a way of saving her. Just imagining this endless cycle left Jusetsu feeling like her heart was wearing down.

“The powerful shamans had done a good job of hiding themselves away, so it was very hard to find one. The first person I possessed was not a shaman, but a shrine maiden. She was a fervent devotee of the goddess, and she had abilities too. I was certain that she would be able to help. I possessed her and tried to call out to Meiju’s ghost, but it didn’t go as I planned. Meiju just wouldn’t respond to anyone’s calls. I possessed several other people and tried again and again, but every time, I had the same result. The only time that I can approach her is when the willow blossoms are in bloom. Spring after spring came and went without me being able to do a thing to help her.”

Hyogetsu closed his eyes. He might have been remembering the catkins flying up through the wind after the flowers had gone away. That was the sign that he had to part from Meiju for yet another year.

“After many springs had come and gone, I decided to look for my mentor. He was the best shaman of his generation, after all. I believed that if I wasn’t able to find him myself, I’d get him to come looking for me. That was when I set my eyes on a failed shaman who was fantastic at swindling people. Sure enough, he was adept at capturing people’s

attention, and even went as far as creating his own religion, the True Teachings of the Moon. There was one problem, however—he was a little *too* flamboyant. Before my mentor had the chance to find me, the ministry noticed me.”

Hyogetsu laughed sardonically. Jusetu and Koshun already knew what happened after that.

“But—or thanks to that, perhaps I should say—I returned to the inner palace and found out that a new Raven Consort had taken up the post. And even better, it seemed like you were related to the Ran family. I thought that if I played my cards right, I might be able to negotiate with you. How foolish an assumption that turned out to be,” said Hyogetsu, casting his gaze downward.

As he did this, it looked like the moon was clouding over, casting a shadow over his gaze. As his name, Hyogetsu—meaning ice moon—suggested, he had a certain beauty to him that was reminiscent of the moon on a chilly night.

“...If only you hadn’t used that court lady as a human shield, I would have calmly listened to what you had to say,” said Jusetu.

“Did you expect me to appear before you with no way of defending myself?” he argued back. “The previous Raven Consort exorcised the ghosts of my grandfather and the rest of my family in one fell swoop. That’s not something you ever forget.”

Jusetu had no idea how to reply to that. She swept away the loose hair that had fallen onto her face and looked over at the lattice window.

“The sun is setting already,” she murmured, turning toward the door.

She almost walked away, but then turned around to face Koshun and her other acquaintances. “Follow me,” she ordered.

Hyogetsu looked uncertain, but Jusetu ignored his apprehension and left the palace building. Part of the sky was light crimson, and another part of it was a luminous white that indicated the moon was about to come up. The sunset appeared to be melting into the branches of the bay tree. They hurried to the southern part of the inner palace, to where Meiju was. As they walked, Jusetu thought back on the folding screen she saw in the vault in the Gyoko Palace. Hyogetsu had looked as striking as cold glass, whereas Meiju’s beauty was as smooth as

gemstones.

“Hyogetsu,” Jusetsu called out behind her.

Koshun and Eisei were walking right behind Jusetsu, but Hyogetsu was trailing behind a little. His footsteps didn’t make a sound and he had no shadow, so it felt peculiar.

“I expect you know that Princess Meiju owned a glass comb, don’t you?”

“Are you talking about one made of white glass?”

“Yes.”

“I know of it. I was the one who gave it to her. It was a symbol of our engagement,” he explained.

“I see...”

When Hyogetsu mentioned giving her an engagement gift, the idea that it could have been that comb did come to Jusetsu’s mind.

“Do you know that it was lost?” she went on.

“Lost?” Hyogetsu repeated, the color draining from his face. “Was it looted?”

“It may have been...but I’m not entirely convinced that’s the case.”

They walked past the Eno Palace, and the peach grove where the willow tree stood came into view. The sky was getting darker and darker, and their surroundings were turning a deeper shade of indigo. At the same time, the round, apricot-shaped moon was beginning to shine bright white. When they approached the willow tree, Jusetsu stopped. Choked up with emotion, Hyogetsu let out an anguished sigh.

Meiju appeared underneath the blossoming willow. In contrast with the intensifying darkness around her, she seemed to radiate a white, hazy light. Jusetsu stared at her drooping head.

“Princess Meiju killed herself under this very willow tree. Do you have any idea why she chose it?” Jusetsu asked.

“Whenever I visited the inner palace, we would always meet here. This was where I proposed to her as well.”

It made sense now. She wanted to have her memories with Hyogetsu with her as she died.

“In that case, it’s hard to imagine that she wouldn’t bring her precious glass comb with her for her final moments.”

It was her engagement gift, after all. If she chose this as the place where she wanted to die, it would be reasonable to assume that she’d wear that comb as she took her last breaths.

“And yet...” Jusetsu said, pointing at Meiju’s head, “she died without the comb in her hair.”

A person’s ghostly form didn’t always represent how they looked when they died. Hyogetsu was a good example of this. Sometimes, the deceased reappeared as a version of themselves that left a strong impression in their mind. If Meiju’s ghost wasn’t wearing the comb, either she looked like that when she died, or a vision of herself not wearing it had been particularly memorable for her. But why would that be? Either way, it would have made more sense for her ghostly form to have the comb on her person.

“I suppose she didn’t want to wear it during her final moments. Otherwise, it would have been on her body and looted.”

Koshun let out a faint sound that was neither speech nor a sigh. It sounded like something had clicked. “Princess Meiju’s belt and the sword she used to kill herself are being stored in the Gyoko Palace’s vault. That’s how it works.”

Jusetsu had berated Koshun once before, asking if he was keeping jewelry stripped from dead bodies.

“The comb could have ended up in the hands of the Flame Emperor, who had killed Hyogetsu,” said Jusetsu. “Wasn’t that the one thing she would have done anything to avoid?”

“Well, then...” Hyogetsu said, looking at Meiju, “where in the world is that comb?”

Jusetsu drew closer to the princess, one step at a time.

“With the troops chasing her, she wouldn’t have had the time to hide it anywhere. She probably came here to the spot where she chose to die, and...” Jusetsu crouched down in front of Princess Meiju and placed her hand on the ground by her feet. The soil was cool. “I suspect she buried it.”

She took a chip of wood out of her breast pocket and began using it to dig into the ground. She didn’t have any other appropriate tools on

her.

“Sei,” Koshun called out, and Eisei reluctantly went over to Jusetsu.

He pulled a dirk out of the breast of his robe and, in one breath, scooped out a big lump of soil.

Does he walk around with a dangerous weapon like that all the time? Jusetsu thought.

“I doubt it’s buried that deep.”

After digging for a while, they hit some willow roots. They were still thin. Jusetsu’s hand froze. Entangled in the roots—or rather, protected by them—was the comb. It was covered in soil, but it was definitely made of white glass. Jusetsu hurriedly dug it out and cleared the dirt out of the way.

“Use this,” Koshun said, offering her a hand cloth.

Once Jusetsu had wiped off the dirt and it was clean, she could see the beautiful comb in the shape of a wave with a peony. Its smooth, milk-white surface had a glossy shine to it under the moonlight. The comb combined the cold, moon-like beauty of Hyogetsu and the soft beauty of Meiju into one item.

“I assume she couldn’t bring herself to leave this place because she was so worried about the comb. It was all that was on her mind.”

As a result, not even Hyogetsu’s voice had gotten through to her—as ironic as that was.

Jusetsu held the comb up in front of Meiju. She gathered heat in her other palm. Light red petals swelled up, creating the shape of a peony. She blew on it; the petals dispersed, turned to smoke, and wrapped around the comb. Then, this smoke flowed toward Meiju. The ghostly woman had been hanging her head, but as if she noticed this, she looked ahead of her for the first time. The light red smoke encircled her. The comb glistened in the moonlight.

Meiju’s absent-looking eyes slowly gained focus. On the other side of the comb stood Hyogetsu. Her eyes opened wide.

“Meiju...” Hyogetsu called out to her, walking forward.

Meiju blinked. Her expression changed completely, as if a wind had blown through her. She kept blinking over and over again, her eyes

sparkling. Soft lines appeared on her cheeks, repelling the light. Her silver hair was tied up, and the cut in her throat healed up and the blood pouring out of the wound faded away. Her blood-soaked robe transformed into a brilliant shanqun that was beautifully embroidered with gold and silver thread over a skirt with a wave pattern printed on it.

Hyogetsu stroked Meiju's hair, and her glass comb appeared in that very spot. Meiju smiled silently and Hyogetsu caught her in his arms. A faint smile appeared on his lips as well. He appeared to whisper something in Meiju's ear, but Jusetsu couldn't catch what it was from where she was standing.

The two of them began to fade away under the moonlight. The branches of the willow, covered in blossom, swung in the night air. The lovers then disappeared without a sound, as if they were hiding away among its weeping flowers.

A feeble wind made the willow tree sway to and fro. Jusetsu gazed at the willow blossoms, illuminated by the moonlight. Nobody said a thing.

After a while, Koshun finally spoke up, his voice so quiet that it sounded as if he was slowly waking up from a dream. "...Let's bury that comb in their grave for them."

The Ran family's graves were at the edge of the imperial estate in a quiet corner of the imperial gardens. The family shrine that had originally existed there had been destroyed, but since the Flame Emperor hated the thought of people worshipping them, he didn't build anything outside of the imperial estate and buried them inside the imperial gardens instead.

"That is a good idea."

Meiju had originally planned on dying alongside the comb, so it was a fitting thing to do.

"It's best that I not lay my hands on it. You should keep it in your custody, as a member of the Ran lineage," Koshun said with a flap of his sleeve.

Jusetsu looked down at the comb. The moonlight softly blanketed its glass like dew.

There was still one job left to do.

The night waned, but Jusetsu sat on the ledge of her lattice window, staring out. The darker the night got, the brighter and purer the moon's light became. When she closed her eyes, the nightingales sounded as if they were closer than they really were. She made her breath shallower and searched for a sign. The deeper she merged with the night, the further her senses could reach. The Winter Sovereign reigned over the nighttime. The night had helped her to do things she'd never have been able to do in the daytime.

Koshun was...in his bedchamber.

She could smell something in the darkness. There was something else in Koshun's space. *What is it?*

Jusetsu opened her eyes slightly. It was the same thing she felt when she went to that Gyoko Palace that morning. It was the same *sign*.

She sniffed.

"You idiot."

That man really was a fool.

Jusetsu got down from the window. As she headed toward the doors, Shinshin started flapping its wings about, acting unruly. She glimpsed over at it, and the corners of her mouth turned up in a smile.

"There is no need to worry, Shinshin. I'll be back soon. Escaping is not an option for me, you infuriating watchdog of Niangniang's," she said. "And if you're planning on telling on me, I'll roast you whole."

After being threatened, the bird quietened down. As soon as Jusetsu opened the door of her palace, she hurried down its steps. With her long skirt hitched up, she ran across the cobblestones in her brocade shoes so quickly that she may as well have been gliding on ice. She left the black palace building behind her, cutting through the forest of bay trees and rhododendrons, and made her way toward the eastern gate of the inner palace.

That eastern gate was the gate that linked the inner palace with the emperor's residence and the inner court. It was known as Ringai Gate. There was a watchfire burning; some guards were stationed at it. Jusetsu pulled a peony out of her hair and blew on it. The flower broke into fine pieces and scattered about. The gate got closer and closer, but Jusetsu didn't slow down—she just slipped right through the guards and

went through it. When Jusetsu went past them, they froze in a daze. Even after Jusetsu had gotten to the other side, they didn't appear to have noticed her.

She headed for the Gyoko Palace, taking the same route that Eisei had shown her that morning. Unlike the Yamei Palace, the lanterns hanging from its eaves had been lit and were shining brightly. Rather than heading to the front, Jusetsu went around the back of the building, as that was where the bedchamber was. She went through the garden and looked for the outer doors.

Oh... This is the smell. It was much stronger than it had been that morning.

Jusetsu formed a peony flower with her hand and placed it in her hair. She found the door she was looking for, then waved a finger. It opened with a loud thunk.

She burst inside to find Koshun, dressed in his nightclothes, looking back at her. He was standing still as a statue in the center of the room.

"Why are you...?" he began.

Even at a time like this, Koshun's voice was tranquil. Jusetsu looked over at the space in front of him. Two ghosts were standing at the door that opened out onto the passageway. One was a pale-faced woman whose robe was dyed vermillion, and the other was a pitiful-looking eunuch. They must have been Koshun's mother—Lady Sha—and Teiran.

Jusetsu silently pulled a peony out of her hair and thrust it out toward the pair who were standing in front of the doors, but Koshun grabbed her arm.

"Wait. What are you doing?" he asked.

"Be quiet and watch. It won't take long."

"Stop it. They aren't doing anyone any harm."

Jusetsu glared at Koshun. "How would you know?" she said. "This is *my* domain."

She shook her arm free of Koshun's grip and blew on the flower. It turned into a pale red flame, then took on the form of an arrow. She faced the ghosts and swung her hand downward. The arrow catapulted, created a wind to travel on, flew through the air, and hit the two ghosts

—or at least, that’s what Jusetsu *expected* to happen. Instead, the arrow weaved between them, and at that very moment, the doors behind them swung open—and the arrow went flying in that direction.

In that instant, a tremendous booming sound rang out through the air. No, it wasn’t a boom—it was a groan. A piercing scream that seemed to echo from the depths of the earth shook in the air. A violent wind blew, and the entire room swayed before eventually settling down again. Then the scream faded away.

Koshun looked over at the open doors, dumbfounded. It didn’t look like he had any clue what had happened. Jusetsu looked around and confirmed that the strong smell was definitely gone.

“What in the world...?” Koshun started.

“Why do you think that pair were standing in front of the doors?” Jusetsu asked. Jusetsu glanced at the two ghosts, who were now lingering beside it.

“I assumed it was because...they had something to tell me.”

“Well, there’s that too—but it was because they were acting as protectors.”

“Protection? What were they...?”

“You really are a fool,” Jusetsu snapped. “*You*, of course.”

Koshun was left speechless. He turned to look at the ghosts.

“You stated that they first appeared around a month ago, did you not? What happened about a month ago?” she asked.

Koshun looked back at Jusetsu. “The...empress dowager was executed,” he said.

Jusetsu nodded. “They presented themselves soon after that, didn’t they?”

“You’re right. It wasn’t *immediately* after, but...” Koshun looked doubtful. “What could this possibly be about?”

“Listen. I noticed a smell in the building when I came here this morning.”

“What kind?”

“The smell of a beast. It reeked of a beastly curse.”

“A curse...?” Koshun repeated, before lowering his voice to

something of a murmur, "It can't be..."

"We should try to inspect the palace where she was imprisoned, or maybe the palace building where she was kept until her execution. There will be traces of the curse there. Oh, yes—looking under her bed, or above the beams would be a good idea."

At the end of her life, the empress dowager had left a curse behind, one that would bring evil upon Koshun after she had gone.

"Then, why Mother and Teiran?"

"They were making a last-ditch attempt to stop the curse that was trying to enter your bedchamber from getting in."

Koshun opened his mouth and tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come out, and he ended up looking down at the floor instead. Then he turned around with a start. The ghosts of Lady Sha and Teiran were next to him. As terrible as they had looked before, they had transformed into their normal appearances. Lady Sha was now a beautiful, narrow-faced lady with a hairpin placed in her updo, and Teiran the eunuch had gentle eyes, tinged with a hint of serenity. They now looked as they did when they were alive. The two of them were smiling—and continued to do so as they instantly dissipated into the dark and vanished. A moment later, all that was left in the room was the light indigo night air.

Koshun reached his hand out toward where they stood, but there was nothing there. He put it down again. Koshun stood there for some time, staring into the dark in total silence.

Without saying a word, Jusetsu turned around and went to leave, but then Koshun called out to stop her.

"Jusetsu."

Argh. Don't.

She hated when he called her by her name. For some strange reason, it sent her heart aflutter and made her feel restless.

"Why did you save me?" he asked.

Jusetsu frowned. "What did you just say?" she responded.

"Aren't you angry with me? Don't you hate me?" Koshun asked calmly.

For a short while, Jusetsu was at a loss for a reply.

"It's...not you who I am infuriated by," she said. "It is the Summer and Winter Sovereigns that once were."

It was their fault that she was imprisoned in the inner palace.

"And if I had left you to die," she went on, "those two would never be able to rest in peace."

She was talking about Lady Sha and Teiran—who, even in death, had endeavored to protect Koshun from harm.

Koshun lowered his gaze. "Thank you," he said.

Jusetsu didn't know how to respond to this candid expression of courtesy. "I have no particular desire for...gratitude."

"I owe you, though. How can I return the favor?"

"How...?"

She was unsure whether she should force him to give her something extravagant, but considering it quickly became wearisome, so she cast that idea aside.

"That would be unnecessary. In fact, if you were to simply stop visiting my palace, that would be reward enough for me."

Koshun looked at her face.

"...What is it?" she said.

"Can't I help *you*?" the emperor asked.

Jusetsu blinked. She stared into his eyes, wondering what he was talking about, but all she could find in them was a sincere light shining right back at her. This confused her.

"I don't need saving..."

"But it seems you are being punished."

Jusetsu averted her gaze and looked into the darkness.

"This must be your punishment for leaving your mother to die."

After that left his lips, he went quiet. Silence hung in the air. Koshun looked hard at Jusetsu's face, trying to work out what she was thinking.

"...In that case," he said quietly, "I must be punished too." His tone of voice was as calm and clear as a winter morning. "I failed to save my mother *and* Teiran. There must be an even harsher punishment

coming my way.”

Jusetsu looked up, stunned. There was a glimmer of sadness in his eyes that could not be dispelled. She was sure that this sadness, if nothing else, was not unlike her own sadness that she carried with her.

“If we take our punishment together, it might not be that bad,” Koshun said, finally walking over to his bed.

Jusetsu stayed where she was standing. Koshun disappeared behind the curtains, while Jusetsu composed herself and headed toward the doors. When she went out into the garden, she found Eisei waiting right outside, startling her. Eisei gently closed the doors without saying a thing, perhaps in an effort not to disturb Koshun’s rest. He looked at Jusetsu very briefly, then placed his hands together in a show of respect.

Jusetsu left the Gyoko Palace, passed through the Ringai Gate in the same way that she had on her way there, and returned to the inner palace. When she got back, Shinshin made a great fuss—as if to reprimand her—but Jusetsu ignored this and opened the curtains. She sat down on her bed and ruminated on what Koshun had said.

“I always knew that man was an idiot,” she whispered to herself. Still dressed in her black robe, she lay down on her mattress.

There was a pattern of waves and birds dyed onto her purple shanqun. The skirt that went with it was made of duckling-yellow twill fabric with circular pearl patterns embroidered onto it. Jiujiu placed a fine silk shawl around Jusetsu’s shoulders. The shawl was the color of cherry blossoms, reminiscent of a spring morning sky. These were all items that Kajo had gifted to Jusetsu.

“Which hairpin would you like to use?”

“Oh...!” Jusetsu exclaimed, remembering something.

She took an ivory comb out of the cabinet. It was the one that Koshun had given her.

“Oh my,” Jiujiu said with a smile. It looked like she was about to say something about Jusetsu’s choice of accessories.

Jusetsu quickly butted in with an excuse. “I’m only wearing this comb because it was made to go with this robe.”

“I said nothing,” Jiujiu responded.

“I’m sure you were about to, though.”

Jiujiu accompanied Jusetsu to the Eno Palace where they were greeted by red rose bushes in full bloom. Kajo was waiting in front of the steps, along with her ladies-in-waiting.

When she saw Jusetsu’s outfit, a smile of satisfaction came to her face. “It suits you perfectly,” she said.

Kajo had invited her over, so Jusetsu was—at long last—paying her a visit.

As promised, she had prepared some light refreshments—white honey dumplings, fuliubing, baozi with lotus seed bean paste... A dizzying array of confectionaries were lined up on the table. Kajo poured a cup of tea by herself and offered it to Jusetsu.

“I’m not entirely sure if you are aware, dear Raven Consort, but it sounds like His Majesty is currently in the process of reviewing the legal code. He insists that much of it is useless. That task seems to be occupying a great deal of his time.”

“I don’t care,” Jusetsu replied, stuffing her mouth with baozi. “That doesn’t interest me in the slightest.”

“According to the letter I received from him, he will not be able to visit you for a little while longer. He told me to inform you of that.”

“Why would he write a message for me in a letter addressed to you?” asked Jusetsu.

“He alleges that you burn his letters without reading them, dear Raven Consort.”

Jusetsu said nothing. *That might be correct*, she thought, *but that didn’t mean he had to make Kajo his messenger.*

“Do you have a message for me to pass on to him, by any chance?”

“No,” Jusetsu replied immediately, before adding, “Just order him not to send over any more useless messages. Actually, never mind—you do not need to tell him anything.”

Jusetsu shook her head.

“If His Majesty is going to insist on sending messages to you regardless, I wish he would compose a poem for you. You’ll have to

forgive him, but poetry and music are not his forte.” Kajo laughed. She sounded like an older sister apologizing for her brother’s lack of skill. Her smile was like a warm and pleasant balmy breeze.

“Why don’t you try some of these as well?” she said, offering Jusetsu some of the white honey dumplings. “There are plenty here.”

Kajo looked at Jusetsu with a smile on her face as the younger woman crammed her mouth full of snacks. “I have ten younger siblings, you see,” Kajo explained. “My youngest sister is still unmarried and living at home. She’s around the same age as you, Raven Consort. This may be rude of me to say, but watching you do that reminds me of her. It’s simply delightful.”

“I don’t find that especially rude.”

“No? In that case, may I call you *amei*?” That was an affectionate name for young girls who were below your age. Jusetsu was flustered.

“You may call me *aje* in exchange,” Kajo went on. That was the name used to refer to older girls.

Kajo seemed to act modest, but she had a pushy side to her too. It had been evident when she gave Jusetsu that robe. Unsure how to reply, Jusetsu simply shoved a white honey dumpling into her mouth.

It was almost nightfall by the time Jusetsu left the Eno Palace. Kajo had been dressing her up in all kinds of different robes, as if she were fussing over a younger sister. When Jusetsu, who had—for some reason—been forced into taking some robes home with her, reached the Yamei Palace, she found some people waiting in front of the doors. It was dusk and their shadows were long, but the two figures standing there were immediately recognizable. It was Koshun and Eisei.

“I wondered why the door wasn’t opening. You were out.”

“Didn’t you say you wouldn’t be able to come by for a while?”

“You must have heard that from Kajo. Everything got taken care of sooner than I expected it would be.”

As he said this, Koshun’s gaze was directed toward Jusetsu’s hair. Jusetsu remembered that she was wearing the comb that he had given her.

“I...”

Realizing it would be odd to give him the same kind of excuse

she'd given to Jiujiu, she stopped herself there. She lifted up her skirt and went up the steps, passing by Koshun. The doors opened by themselves.

Once they were inside, Koshun got Jiujiu to leave. Then, he sat down in a seat that hadn't even been offered to him, just as he always did.

"What do you want?"

There was a fair chance that it was something secret, considering he'd dismissed Jiujiu. Realizing this, Jusetsu sat down opposite the emperor.

"Oh yes," Koshun began. He sat quietly for a while before eventually saying, "...I've been sorting out the legal code."

"Kajo told me as much. What does that have to do with me?"

"I've abolished the laws I deemed unnecessary...including the one ordering the capture and killing of the Ran family."

Jusetsu gulped, astonished.

"The entire Ran family is dead—officially speaking—so that law was already as good as gone. There is no need for it anymore."

Jusetsu opened her eyes wide with surprise, listening carefully to what Koshun was saying in his matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"If the Raven Consort is the one who substantiates the sovereign's royal status, then we cannot lose her under any circumstances. For that reason, I couldn't leave that law in place."

After a short pause, Koshun carried on speaking to Jusetsu, who was still sitting there in silence.

"There are no laws ordering your capture or death anymore. There's no need to fear," Koshun quietly repeated, staring intently at Jusetsu and watching how she was reacting.

Jusetsu was looking into his eyes, trying to read what his intentions could have possibly been—but Koshun's eyes were as peaceful as winter snow, and implied no intent that hadn't already been expressed.

"You..." Koshun began, but then his eyes flickered with hesitation, and he clammed up.

He had been choosing his words very carefully. Jusetsu realized

this, and her lips quivered slightly as she tried to resist the urge to say something. He was searching hard for the right words to avoid hurting her feelings.

Jusetsu pursed her lips tight and looked toward the floor.

“Have I upset you?” Koshun asked, sounding somewhat flustered.

The tone of his voice didn’t change very much, but—as calm as it was—Jusetsu had learned to discern the sadness, harshness, and tenderness in it better than she could at first.

Jusetsu shook her head. Unsure how to reply and what expression to make, she hung her head.

Koshun was trying to be considerate of Jusetsu’s pain. He was reaching out his hand toward it, attempting to share its weight.

He didn’t know whether or not it was the right thing to do. If there was no need for him to understand her, she wasn’t obliged to accept his help. Jusetsu didn’t need him to understand it either. She didn’t want him to save her.

And yet...

“Take this.”

Koshun took something out of his breast pocket and put it down on the table. There were two items—two model fish made from glass. One of them was clear, while the other was milky white with a hint of red. Both of them had scales finely carved into them and silver paint poured into the grooves. Koshun moved the light red one toward Jusetsu.

“This one is for you. The other one is mine.”

Koshun picked up the transparent glass fish. “Let’s make a vow,” he said.

“A vow...?”

“Some promises between me and you—the Summer Sovereign and the Winter Sovereign.”

Jusetsu looked at Koshun and the pale red glass in turn. She reached her hand out and gently picked it up. It was slippery, and warm too—presumably because it had been tucked away in Koshun’s pocket. She traced its carved fins with a finger, then looked up at him.

“What do these promises pertain to, then?”

“One of them is the promise I made to you before—that I would not kill you, no matter what happens.”

“No matter what happens?”

“Yes.”

“And what about the other one...?”

“That you and I will not fight.”

“I never had any intention of fighting with you.”

“That means that I will keep you here for the rest of your life as the Raven Consort, rather than the Winter Sovereign.”

“I don’t have any other choice.”

The corners of her mouth crept upward in a smile, and Koshun went quiet for a while. She lowered her gaze, and when she looked up again, he was staring straight into her eyes.

“When I am alone with you, I will not treat you as the Raven Consort, but as the Winter Sovereign.”

With that, Koshun stood up. Jusetsu thought that he would come over to her, but before she knew it, he fell to his knees. Jusetsu was taken aback. Eisei, who’d been hanging back at the doorway, also went pale and jerked in surprise. Jusetsu and Eisei’s shocked reactions didn’t seem to bother Koshun at all, because he simply put his hands together and bowed to Jusetsu.

“I would like to pay my deepest respects to not only you, but all the other Raven Consorts who have served before you,” he said.

When he raised his head, his eyes seemed to be looking straight through Jusetsu and into the distance. As bewildered as she was, she met his eyes. Reijo, who had died of old age in this very palace, came to mind, then disappeared again. A small sigh fell from her lips.

Jusetsu glanced at the glass object in her palm, then got up. She looked down at Koshun. The look in his eyes was as calm as it always was. Jusetsu reached her hand out toward him. Koshun grabbed hold of it and got to his feet. This demonstrated that Jusetsu had accepted his vow.

The fact that he concerned himself with my pain has proved to be a great help, Jusetsu thought. *Even if what he had done had been wrong.*

“Did you make this model fish?” she asked Koshun, looking at the

glass object in her hand.

Koshun's eyebrows twitched.

"I didn't," he replied. "Making something this detailed would be beyond my capabilities. I had On Shiin from the court workshop make it for me."

There was a hint of frustration on his face. It was the first time Jusetsu had ever seen him make an expression like that. It reminded her of a little boy.

As she gazed at his face with this rare thought in mind, he darted his eyes about, looking embarrassed.

"I could make a wood carving for you in no time, though."

"Nobody said they wanted one, certainly not me."

"I can make birds. And flowers too."

"Flowers? Oh, that's right. You made that whistle, didn't you?"

The red roses outside the Eno Palace sprung to her mind.

"...Could you make roses?" Jusetsu asked.

"I can make roses, magnolias, lotuses..."

"I want a rose."

Koshun blinked. "All right."

"If it's made of wood, it will never wither," Jusetsu said, half smiling—but when she noticed Koshun was looking at her, she wiped the smirk off her face again.

She turned her face away and sat back down in her seat. Koshun seated himself opposite her again.

"Aren't you going home yet? I thought we were finished."

"I forgot to say something," Koshun said. "There's more to the vow."

"Oh?"

"Just one more thing. I want to become a good friend of yours."

Jusetsu looked at him for a while. As expected, his eyes were serene and clear. She suddenly thought about how the winter sun looked shining in through the lattice window, with its faint, weak light glistening softly.

“A friend...”

“Yes,” Koshun answered with the utmost sincerity.

This young man had probably spent days pondering in earnest over Jusetsu’s flippant remarks and the suffering she had complained about. The answers he had come up with were to abolish the law ordering the capture and killing of the Ran family—as well as these other vows.

Jusetsu tightened her grip on the glass fish. It was smooth, and peculiarly warm. “You’re...a true fool.”

“Am I now?”

“That’s no vow,” she said.

“Yes, it is. It’s a vow I’m making to myself.”

“Hmph,” went Jusetsu, rolling the glass object around in her hand. “What does being a friend involve?”

“I’m not too familiar with the concept myself,” Koshun replied in his signature matter-of-fact way. “I think it involves having tea together and other activities of that sort... Sei!”

Koshun turned around and called out to Eisei. The eunuch silently came over to him.

After a short pause, Jusetsu simply nodded. Eisei started walking over to the kitchen. A few moments later, the gentle, refreshing scent of tea boiling came wafting through the room.

Jusetsu opened up her hand and gazed at the glass object that was resting in it. *I’m sure this would look beautiful with the moonlight pouring down on it*, she thought to herself.

She had a feeling that the piece of glass, filled with light as clear as dew, was quite fitting for the prayer that they were calling a vow.



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